



KRISTINA J. JORDAN

STRONG

BOOK 2

THE CROWN AND THE
SCEPTRE SERIES

Strong - A Fairy Tale Retelling of the Princess and the Pea

The Crown and the Sceptre, Volume 2

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Published by Kristina J Jordan, 2021.

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STRONG - A FAIRY TALE RETELLING OF THE PRINCESS AND THE PEA

First edition. July 10, 2021.

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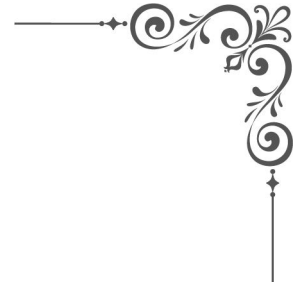
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PROLOGUE

Celine adjusted her rustling silk skirt, gazing at the flock of seagulls swooping and diving out the window, jealous of their freedom. One week ago—one very long, tedious week ago—she had pranced in the Iasian castle gates; leading the first Lovanian delegation to the newly released kingdom of Iasia. Unfortunately for Celine, who loved adventure and hated sitting still, that was the last bit of action she was likely to see for a while.

“And, wouldn’t you agree, your Highness?”

Celine jerked her attention from the window at the gentle, yet steely voice.

“Oh, yes, definitely. That would be fantastic.” Celine pasted on her court smile, pointing it at Queen Abigail. Queen Abigail—recently thrust into the royal role when Queen Penelope had come to a traitorous and unbecoming end was desperate to make up for the shortcomings of her predecessor queen by showering Princess Celine with attention. Every single minute of every single day, Celine sighed.

“Wonderful!” A practiced smile graced Queen Abigail’s face. Celine’s finger twitched as she focused on the embroidery in her lap. Hopefully, she hadn’t agreed to anything too outrageous. Although with Queen Abigail, that was highly unlikely. She shot a considered look at the Queen’s elegant gown and prim hair. So... tidy.

“We must arrange a time for you two to meet. It’s *such* a shame Prince Alexander disappeared on a hunting trip just when you arrived. Men can be so inconsiderate, don’t you think?” Queen Abigail bestowed another smile on Celine—this one held a disapproving air aimed toward the members of the hunting trip. “He should be back before the end of next week, though. I’m sure he’ll be delighted with the arrangement. He told me he only wanted to marry a *real* princess.”

Celine’s eyes slid toward Abigail, her polite expression slipping.

“Did he?” She kept her voice placid and calm, but her mind... Her mind raced. If only she’d paid attention, she wouldn’t have agreed to whatever ridiculous notion Queen Abigail had concocted. She pinched her fingers together tightly, a bundle of nerves clenching in her chest.

“Obviously, we’ll wait to make the official agreement after the two of you meet. We aren’t so archaic that we would fob you off on each other sight unseen. But this is such a relief. You don’t know how difficult it was when our family was thrown into the royal role so suddenly. To have an alliance, especially with Lovan, would make such a difference.”

“Certainly,” Celine choked, hoping her voice was airy. Despite the mild temperature, sweat stuck the stiff folds of her dress to her clammy skin. Mother and Father would be so disappointed in her if she spoiled her very first delegation—she needed to find a way out of this mess. And quickly—because judging by the glint shining in Queen Abigail’s eye, plans were being hatched. Plans Celine intended to have nothing to do with. She came here for adventure, not to be roped into a marriage alliance with a prince she’d never laid eyes on. To buy time, she added a spoonful of honey to her tea, stirring slowly as she balanced the delicate china cup in her hand.

“Oh yes, of course I’ll have to consult my mother and father in person, of course. Any marriage alliance I enter will need King Erich and Queen Isabella’s approval.” A serene smile sat on Celine’s lips. There, that should stall Queen Abigail until she could fix the situation. She sipped, letting the sweetness sit on her tongue before reaching for a meringue, choosing her favorite, the one with a dusting of toasted coconut flakes.

“Of course, dear.” Queen Abigail’s eyes darted to the side.

“Long engagements are traditional for Lovanians. Especially Lovanian royalty.”

“Really?” Queen Abigail furrowed her brow. “Didn’t your brother Frederick marry after just a few months engagement?”

“Um... yes. But those were very special circumstances. They had to get permission from the king.”

“Ah, well then, that shouldn’t be a problem for you, my dear. After all, King Erich is your father.” Queen Abigail chose a strand of lavender thread for her embroidery.

Celine bit her lip and watched the clock, willing the minutes to tick by until she could go find a place to think. There must be some way, some polite way, to preserve cordial relations between Lovan and Iasia *and* tell Queen Abigail she didn’t want to join her son, Crown Prince Alexander, in a marriage alliance.

The next morning Celine slipped down to the arena early. It felt good to stretch her muscles. She whirled, twirling her practice sword around her

head before she tossed it to her other hand and struck.

“That’s a new move.” Lord Gunther panted as he dove out of range of the weapon.

“I know. I saw it at the exhibition they presented the other day, and I wanted to try it.” Celine executed a series of feints before flicking her sword to the left, catching Gunther off guard.

“You were good; but now you’re getting better than ever.” Gunther rubbed his wrist and picked up his sword, shaking off the arena dust. If these weren’t practice swords, you would have unmanned me. You used to never get that close—not to me.”

“I’ve been practicing.” Celine said, beaming at the compliment. After the last few days of attending parties full of stiff strangers, drinking tea, and attending too many events to count, the freedom of the practice arena was heady. “Although I’m going to get rusty if I stay in Iasia much longer. I haven’t had a minute.”

“I know, but it’s just another two weeks.”

“But Gunther, I don’t think I’m very good at these diplomatic trips.” Celine sat down on the wooden railing at the side of the arena. “I made the biggest mistake yesterday. Father is going to kill me when he finds out, especially after I pressured him into letting me lead the delegation.”

“What mistake?” Gunther’s eyes held a wary expression. “The only time I left you was when you went to drink tea with Queen Abigail.”

“That’s exactly when it happened. At tea, it was just so *boring*, I got distracted. And I think—I think I agreed to something and I’m not sure I can get out of it. Not if we want friendly terms with Iasia.”

“Agreed to what, exactly?” Gunther drew his brow down suspiciously as he set the practice swords on the weapons rack.

“Agreed to marry Prince Alexander? Or maybe it was the other one. Landy... Landry.. I don’t remember.” Celine’s voice rose to a wail. “I’ve never met either of them. What should I do?”

“You agreed to do *what*?” Gunther’s voice rose.

“Marry the prince... wait a minute, can I even agree to that? Maybe it’s against protocol, maybe only Father can make those kinds of decisions, after all there is an alliance involved.” Celine’s face brightened.

“That might be, but if you made it sound like a possibility to Queen Abigail, we’re going to have to tread lightly. We just got back on good terms with the Iasians; and you know how we depend on the trade route that

cuts through Iasian territory... why are you always so impulsive?" Gunther rubbed his temple.

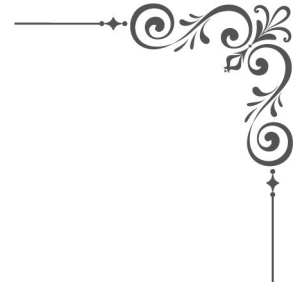
"I know, I know." Celine buried her head in her hands. "What should I do?" She peeked through her fingers, hoping for an answer.

Gunther ran his fingers through his thick black hair. "We'll go along with Queen Abigail for now; if you see a way out, take it. I'll send an urgent message to your father informing him about what's going on."

"Do you really *have* to?" Celine rubbed the toe of her boot on the floor of the arena, kicking up a cloud of dust that itched her nose and eyes.

"Celine, you know I do." Gunther wiped his face with a cloth. "But we have time; we'll figure a way out of this predicament while keeping the kingdom relationship intact. If anyone can sort this out, King Erich can." His words were encouraging, but his face told another story.

"But I wanted father to be proud of me." Celine sat, watching Gunther leave the arena, before picking up another practice sword, launching into a series of lunges, stabbing the air again and again, until a sheen of sweat covered her skin. After exhausting herself, she sat, breathing hard; hoping desperately she hadn't started something that she couldn't mend.



CHAPTER ONE

Celine straightened the tiara on her head, wincing as its solid weight pinched her brow. Celine had tried *very* hard over the past several days to find an opportunity to break the news to Queen Abigail that she had no interest in being engaged to Prince Alexander, or any other prince for that matter. But every time she got close to broaching the subject, Queen Abigail or King Ruben or even friendly Prince Landry hastily changed the subject. Now, it was time for Prince Alexander to return from his hunting trip and Celine *still* hadn't broken the news.

"You look lovely, your highness. You must be so excited." Sarah, the lady-in-waiting who'd accompanied Celine from Lovan, fussed with the hem of her buttercup hued gown. The colour matched her flowing golden hair, held back with pearl tipped pins.

"Oh, definitely. Very excited." Celine stretched a wide smile across her cheeks. She didn't want the royal family to find out about the non-existent engagement from the castle grapevine, so kept her feelings about the matter strictly between herself and Lord Gunther. As one of the most trusted members of her Father's council, she knew Gunther would keep the matter discreet. She dabbed floral essence on her wrist and neck, letting the sweet scent warm against her skin.

One last check in the mirror. Celine took a deep breath before straightening her spine and gliding into the corridor.

"I hope Prince Alexander doesn't like blondes." Celine muttered to herself as she strode toward the dining hall. Her dearest hope was that Prince Alexander wouldn't be interested in her. The relief would far outweigh the sting of rejection, she decided, walking past a golden statue of a long dead Iasian king.

Lost in thought, Celine didn't see the slight girl coming her way, lugging a heavy tray piled high with the remnants of an abandoned afternoon tea. Celine caught the edge of the tray with her elbow and sent the contents crashing to the ground, scattering broken dishes, crumbs and cutlery across the floor.

"Oh, your highness." The girl's voice trembled, so frightened she seemed on the verge of tears. "I am *so* sorry."

“Don’t worry about it, I think it was my fault anyway, I should have looked where I was going.” Heedless of her delicate silk dress, Celine knelt to help the girl gather crockery, brushing the broken shards onto an empty plate.

Tears welled up in the girl’s eyes when she spotted a large patch of wet tea spreading on the silk of Celine’s yellow gown.

“Oh, that.” Celine dismissively brushed the stain. “We can worry about that later, I never really liked this dress anyway. Here, let me help you carry some of this. Were you on your way to the kitchen?” Ignoring the girl’s protest, Celine grabbed a haphazard pile of plates, ignoring the smear of chocolate sauce that joined the tea stain on her gown.

“But, your highness, you’ll be late, and the dinner party is for you.” The girl tried to take the plates away.

“I insist.” Celine headed to the kitchen, on the way finding out that the girl’s name was Louise. This was her first week working at the castle, and yes—she was indeed very glad Queen Penelope left because Queen Abigail was lovely in comparison to that tyrant. After several twists and turns, they arrived at the bustling kitchen where a red-faced cook, waving a wooden spoon dripping with batter, met them.

“So you see, it wasn’t her fault, it was mine.” Celine flashed her most charming smile; trying to wheedle a bit of warmth out of the cook. “And it was such a shame, I saw the coconut meringues were on the tray, they’re my favourite, I’ve been devouring them all week. You must send the recipe home to Lovan with me. My mother, Queen Isabella would love those.”

At this, the cook’s face softened, “Off you go then Louise. Make sure you don’t leave any shards in the dishwater, it would cut your fingers and where would we be then?” She dismissed Louise with a nod. “Thank you, your highness.” She bobbed a curtsy to Celine before turning back to the range.

Celine went back to her room and changed her dress, which made her very late to the dinner. Everyone had finished their first course, and the weight of every eye bored into her as she slid into her seat.

“Sorry. I completely lost track of time.” Celine flicked her hair back, smiling around the room. At the other end of the table a pair of unfamiliar brown eyes met hers, their steady gaze unwavering as they met hers. *That must be Prince Alexander.* Flustered at the intensity of his gaze, she looked at her plate, taking a spoonful of the delicate bisque set in front of her.

“Celine, this is my son, Prince Alexander.” Queen Abigail confirmed Celine’s suspicions as she gestured toward the dark-eyed stranger.

Celine swallowed, the savory bisque turning in her stomach. “Lovely to meet you.” She nodded toward the prince, trying not to notice the way his broad shoulders filled out his finely woven jacket. Suddenly unable to eat another bite, she set down her spoon.

After seven more courses, none of which Celine could do more than nibble on; it was time for dessert. Celine brightened, knowing this meant she could soon escape to her chamber, away from the dark eyes that seemed able to pierce through her shield of pleasantness she put on in social situations.

“And now for a toast.” King Ruben stood, clinking his spoon against his glass. Celine’s heart clenched in her chest, sending prickles of panic running up her spine. She hoped this wasn’t going in the direction she suspected it would. “To the lovely Celine and our son, Prince Alexander. It’s not official yet, but since we’re among friends tonight, we want you to be the first to know.... this is the... ahem.... unofficial engagement.” He raised his glass and beamed triumphantly at the twenty people sitting around the table.

Celine’s heart sank, but she covered her distress with a brilliant smile as she accepted the congratulations of the well-wishers. She raised her eyes to those of the dark-eyed stranger, who sat still as stone, an inscrutable expression on his handsome face. *He looks no more excited about this than I do.* She gave the prince a curious look, wondering for the first time if he was as surprised by this development as she was.

“And now, we will let the couple have their first dance together.” King Ruben’s voice broke into Celine’s thoughts, snapping her out of her reverie. Celine pasted a smile on her face as she stood, the silk layers of her deep red dress fluttering as she floated toward the dance floor. Prince Alexander met her there, gravely offering his hand as they approached the dance floor together.

As the music played, they drifted out into the middle of the floor. Putting his hand around her waist, he leaned down and whispered. “I liked the yellow dress too.”

Celine covered her surprise with a serene expression. He must have been in the hall earlier and seen her with Louise, the kitchen maid.

“Thank you, it’s one of my favourite colours.” She whispered back as she swung out in a graceful spin before twirling back in again. Every eye in the room watched, all eyes glued to them as they swayed across the polished floor. Prince Alexander didn’t speak to Celine again, and when the music ended, he bowed formally to her curtsey amid a smattering of polite applause. King Ruben and Queen Abigail smiled proudly, and Celine quickly averted her eyes, finally settling them on Gunther, who gazed back, expression full of worry. The dance floor soon filled with other guests, allowing Celine the chance to escape to Gunther’s side.

“Did you know this announcement was going to happen?” she spoke out of the side of her mouth in a low voice, as she glanced around surreptitiously to make sure no one was close enough to overhear.

“No.” Gunther shook his head with a frown. “I thought the plan was to keep it quiet until you had the chance to speak to your father. Are they so determined to make this marriage happen?”

“What are we going to do now?” Celine felt the panic edge into her voice.

“I don’t know. The news will spread like wildfire now that everyone here knows. We’ll just have to keep reiterating that it needs to go through the formal channels before it becomes official. Why didn’t you speak to Queen Abigail sooner? I thought that was the plan.”

“I tried.” Celine rubbed her temple, a headache blooming. “She kept changing the subject. I think she knows I was caught off guard and have no intention of marrying the prince, but they’re determined to push through with it, anyway. If only Father had let me take part in more back at our Lovanian court, I might have been on my toes. But that’s not all; I think Prince Alexander was spying on me. He told me he liked the yellow dress better.”

“Yellow dress?” Gunther crinkled his brow.

“Yes. I had a yellow dress on earlier, but there was a mishap on the way to dinner, I had to change. The prince must have seen me.”

“Well, if he was spying on you, he wouldn’t have mentioned it. Did he say anything else to you, anything that might show how he feels about the alliance?”

“No. He didn’t talk to me at all. I think he must hate me.” Celine’s shoulders drooped.

“We have a few more days.” Gunther consoled her. “We’ll just have to keep looking for an opportunity to negotiate.” As the music faded, people left the dance floor, ending their discussion.

The next morning, after an extra long practice session, Celine wandered into the breakfast room only to learn that Prince Alexander had left late the night before.

“He’s gone away to our country estate; rode out early this morning.” Queen Abigail explained as she spread marmalade a slice of buttered toast. “There’s so much to do now; we never had a chance to settle our estate and move our things since Penelope... left so suddenly. But I’m so glad you two met. It was lovely seeing you dance last night. Like a song.” She dabbed at the invisible crumbs on her face with a starched linen napkin.

Celine piled her plate with scrambled eggs, sausages and a mound of grilled mushrooms. “Oh, yes, about Prince Alexander—I was hoping to speak to my father when I get home. But in the meantime, are you sure if it’s a good idea that—”

“Oh dear, look at the time,” Queen Abigail interrupted gaily as she stood, leaving half eaten toast on the plate. “I’m supposed to meet with the seamstress about new curtains this morning. So busy settling into a new place. You must excuse me.” She rushed toward the door before Celine finished her sentence.

“Wait.” Celine gathered all her courage, determined not to let Queen Abigail avoid the subject any longer. “I need to talk to you about the engagement.”

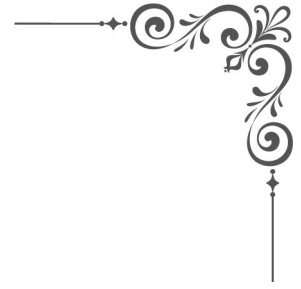
“Of course, dear.” Queen Abigail sat back down in her seat, reluctance etching her pretty face.

Celine took a deep breath. She hated to make anyone unhappy; and she had a feeling what she was about to say was going to make Queen Abigail very, very unhappy. “I don’t know if I’m ready to settle down just yet. I might need—more time.”

“Of course, my darling. Take all the time you need.” Queen Abigail reached out, patting Celine on the hand. “King Ruben and I just got over excited about the whole engagement. I mean, you’re *so* lovely, and of course after the disaster with Queen Penelope, the alliance would be wonderful. After all—it was at the hand of your Princess Lucie that Penelope expired.” Queen Abigail raised an eyebrow.

Celine gulped, the main purpose of the delegation was to restore civil diplomatic relations after the disaster with Penelope. Even though Penelope was the one technically at fault, they couldn't afford isolation from their closest neighbors and allies. "Of course." Celine poked at a sausage with her fork. "A new alliance would be wonderful."

"I'm so glad you agree." Queen Abigail's face resumed its expression of calm. "Now, I really must be going. I do so hate being late for appointments."



CHAPTER TWO

Queen Abigail and King Ruben waved cheerily as Celine and her entourage left the castle gates. Celine rolled the tension from her shoulders, letting the wind blow through her hair. It had been a long tense week. After relaying what Queen Abigail said; Gunther advised Celine to leave the situation to her father, King Erich. “He won’t make you do anything you don’t feel comfortable with.” The worry lurking in Gunther’s eyes belayed his confident tone, and Celine couldn’t get rid of the worry that twisted in her gut.

Celine held her face up to the sunshine, enjoying the countryside stretched out around her. She sat on Ginger; the whiskey coloured mare she received for an eighteenth birthday present from King Erich and Queen Isabella. Celine preferred to ride—so much better than sitting in a stuffy carriage. Behind her in the carriage was Sarah, along with the collection of guards her father had sent for the delegation.

“Is father going to be angry with me?” They were entering the border town of Harvin, their horses kicking up dust as they trotted down the main street. Celine glanced around. The little town was busier than usual, the thriving market square bustling with what appeared to be a carnival.

“I don’t think *angry*,” Gunther replied thoughtfully. “Maybe just worried. You know your happiness is his first concern. Erich’s excellent at diplomacy; he won’t let the Iasians push Lovan into anything he doesn’t approve of. It was your first attempt at delegation; considering that, this is forgivable—some slip was bound to happen. I just wish I hadn’t let Abigail corner you.”

Celine sighed. “I wanted everything to be perfect because it was my first time—oh look.” She broke off mid-sentence and pointed to a woman in a sparkling gown who was twirling barefoot on the back of a horse.

“Yes, it looks like there are performers here. They probably came with the carnival.” Gunther glanced over, uninterested.

“Performers? Why haven’t we ever had these performers in the castle for one of our events?” Wide-eyed, Celine took in the sights. To her left, a group of acrobats practiced their routine, contorting their bodies to fly through the air in a series of flips and twists.

“Well, sometimes carnival characters can be unsavoury—try not to draw their attention.” Drawing himself up in his saddle, Gunther kept his gaze firmly ahead as he rode toward the inn in the centre of the town. “We’ll have to stay indoors tonight and leave first thing in the morning.”

As Gunther sped up his pace, Celine craned her neck, trying to get a better look. This was so unlike anything she had seen before. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a gilt-edged sign advertising a fortune teller. Leaving the horses in the courtyard with his men, Gunther ushered Celine and Sarah inside, away from the activity.

“So lovely to see you again,” Henrietta, the innkeeper, emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. “We’ve made our chicken and dumplings tonight. And apple tart.” She waved them toward a long wooden table in the centre of the cheery room. A crackling fire blazed in the fireplace, casting a warm, cosy glow over the tables.

Celine chose a seat with a view of the window where she watched a steady stream of carefree townspeople heading toward Market Square. “What’s happening out there?” she asked Henrietta, keeping her voice casual.

“The carnival is in town this week.” Henrietta wrinkled her nose in disdain as she set down steaming bowls of chicken and dumplings. A loaf of bread accompanied by a generous knob of freshly churned butter followed.

“Lovely for the children, although you have to keep an eye on anything not nailed down when they’re around.” Henrietta poured mugs of foaming cider from a clay jug.

“See? Unsavoury.” Gunther took an enormous chunk of bread and spread it thick with butter. “Don’t get ideas in your head, you’re staying in here where it’s safe young lady.” He shot Celine a stern look, pulling his bushy black eyebrows in a firm line across his forehead.

“Oh, of course not.” Celine pasted on her most innocent expression as she took a bite of savory chicken, letting the rich gravy fill her mouth with its flavour. “In fact, I think I’m going to go have a rest. It’s been such a long day.” She faked a yawn as she stretched and headed for the stairs.

Gunther eyed Celine suspiciously as she left the dining room, followed by the loyal Sarah.

“I’m going out to see the carnival, I need to borrow a dress, one that won’t draw attention.” Celine sat on the narrow bed and began unlacing her velvet gown.

“But, didn’t Gunther tell us to stay in?” An anxious expression crossed Sarah’s face. She hated bending the rules, one reason King Erich had sent her along with Celine in the first place.

“Yes, but what Gunther doesn’t know won’t hurt him. I’m just going to slip out for a few minutes. You know I can defend myself; not that I’ll need to,” Celine added quickly, seeing the panicked look on Sarah’s face. “I just need to stay low and I’ll be fine.” Celine rooted through a trunk, producing a nondescript grey dress. “This is perfect. But I’ll need a knife or a dagger, something small. A sword would definitely look suspicious under this.” Celine continued to sift through the contents of the trunk, pulling out a small pearl-handled knife and a dagger. She stuffed one in her pocket and the other in a small satchel slung over her shoulder.

“You stay here and cover for me.” She directed Sarah as she tucked her distinctive blonde hair under a cap. She added a handful of coins to the bag.

“But, what will I tell Gunther if he asks where you are?” Sarah worried her lip as she watched Celine arrange pillows under the blankets on one bed.

“Just tell him I fell asleep. He’s far too much of a gentleman to come in for a closer look.” Celine tossed Sarah a cheeky grin as she opened the window. Although her chamber was on the second floor, there was a trellis strong enough to hold her weight. She pushed back the creaky shutter wide and eased down the trellis, leaving Sarah standing helplessly at the window.

A heady sense of freedom washed over Celine as she breathed in the scent of fried food and sweet sugary pastries. Skipping after the crowd, she made her way through town until she reached Market Square, by now packed with villagers, finished with their day’s labour. Celine spent a few minutes browsing stalls selling food and other merchandise before settling on a sweet, sticky concoction of fried dough sprinkled with nutmeg sugar. After finishing her treat, Celine leaned against a railing, licking sugar off her fingers while watching a fire twirler spin his baton—a blur of golden flame against the evening sky. After a few moments she moved on, weaving through stalls of trinkets, fabric and wares. Spotting a crowd flocking around a performance, she drew closer.

Curious to see what the fuss was about; Celine pushed her way through the crowd. A young woman, only a girl really, modestly dressed save for the intricate copper neckplate circling her slender throat had the crowd mesmerised. She stood motionless on a small wooden platform. Celine

glanced up at the sign over the platform. Shifter, she wondered what that could mean—everyone knew real shifters were a mere fairy tales. A black-haired man at the base of the platform held a metal bowl half-filled with coins. Celine's keen eyes noted his velvet jacket, once fine, was worn and soiled in places.

"Parrot," called a young boy, throwing a coin into the bowl. He looked up eagerly, excitement lighting up his face. Celine watched as the slender girl closed her eyes, face drawn in concentration. With a flash of light and a puff of gritty smelling smoke, a large parrot flapped its wings where the girl had been standing a split second before.

Celine's eyes widened. There had been entertainment brought into the castle; but never anything like this. A moment later, another flash of light, and the girl once again stood before them. The crowd clapped as another customer stepped forward.

"A donkey." A half grown man stepped forward, putting his coin into the bowl. Another flash of light and that strange gritty smell and a small grey donkey stood on the platform, nodding its head and swishing its stubby tail. The crowd cheered as the shape of the girl replaced the donkey, looking a bit pale, though none the worse for wear. After a few more changes, Celine moved on to the fortune-teller, ducking under the sign into the tent, stifling after the cool air outside.

"Hold out your hand, dearie." The fortune-teller, a tall woman with a lined face and dark unbound hair spilling down her back, sat at a small velvet covered table. "I charge extra for the crystal." She nodded to a large shape covered by a black cloth. Celine assumed that must be a crystal ball.

"I don't need the crystal." Celine saved a few coins to purchase a trinket for Sarah, after all, Sarah *was* very good about covering for her on this little adventure. She obediently held out her hand. A tingle ran up her arm at the woman's touch.

"Hmm... very interesting." The woman took Celine's manicured hand in her own rough one. She eyed the nails, buffed into smooth ovals. "I see you are from nobility. I take it you've escaped your minders for the evening?"

"Yes." Surprised by the twinge of bitterness in the woman's voice, Celine wondered if seeing the fortune-teller was a such good idea. The last thing she needed was to have her cover blown. Gunther would never allow her out again. Now that the laws changed to allow mages and magic users to practice freely in Lovan, chances were, this woman was genuine. Celine

tried to pull her hand away, suddenly aware that she was alone, and no one knew exactly where she was.

“Well.” The woman’s stiff fingers gripped Celine’s hand tightly before letting go. “I see you like adventures, but you feel trapped by recent circumstances. Stifled. But things will change soon. Very soon. You need to be careful because people aren’t what they seem.”

“Thank you.” Celine drew away her hand, clasping it tight. She fished out a coin and placed it on the table, avoiding the strange woman’s touch.

“Don’t worry, dear. I will not hurt you.” The woman paused, lost in thought for a moment before speaking. “You’re going to need this.” The woman fished in the pocket of her voluminous patchwork skirt and pulled out a key. Celine reached out for the tiny key; brass, noting the peculiar silver inlay embedded into its shank.

“Now, I believe I have another customer.” The woman fixed her eyes behind Celine where the shadow of her next client fell across the tent entrance. Celine put the key in her pocket and turned to leave, brushing against the brightly embroidered sign over the fortune-teller’s tent. She blinked a, getting her bearings. Realizing it was near dinner time, she headed back to the inn. Just as she was rounding the corner, a harsh voice stopped Celine in her tracks.

“I know you’re tired, but I paid good money to buy you, and you need to do your job.” The voice said. It was the man in the green velvet jacket, hovering over the young girl who had been performing on the stage earlier.

“But if I do too many switches, it drains me.” The girl cringed, face pale, save the purple shadows under her eyes. “I don’t know if I can keep it up for another two days. I need rest and then I’ll do whatever you want, I promise.” Her eyes pleaded, luminous with tears.

“You need to keep it up *now*. We’ve got a good gig here, it’s the best it’s ever been in Lovan; and I don’t want to hear anymore complaining.” His voice was harsh, loud. Celine winced as he raised his hand to the girl, whipping her head back with the force of his blow.

Tears traced the girl’s cheeks as she bowed her head, beaten into submission. “Now, you go out there, and you smile at them tonight—if you do your job right, I won’t punish you anymore today. Then we’ll talk.”

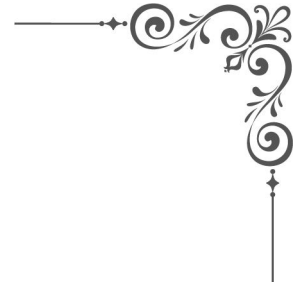
Celine quickly slid behind the tent as the man turned, striding toward her. “Always complaining about something.” he muttered, stooping into the fortune-teller’s tent.

“Gerta!” he bellowed.

“Yes.” The fortune-teller’s voice was placid, calm. “I don’t want you putting ideas into that little brat’s head. I did her a big favour taking her in like this. You know what was going to happen to her otherwise—and, you.”

“I know,” Gerta soothed. “But Karl, she’s young, only coming into her skills. Go easy on her or you’ll wear her out, you’d be making no coin from her then. And you know she’s your best performer. Look, as long as she’s got the collar on, she has to do what you want. Think about the long term; you want her earning for you three, five, even fifteen years from now. Give her time.” Celine heard rustling skirts as Gerta’s shadow moved across the tent.

“I suppose,” Karl relented. “I’ll think about it. But tonight she has to work, I want to make a point that she has to do what I say when I say it. And like you said, Gerta, you know what happens to magic users in Lovan when they’re on their own, people would eat her alive. Cheeky brat needs us more than we need her; we just have to remind her who’s in charge.” As Karl moved to leave, Celine slipped away, melting into the shadows as he emerged from the tent.



CHAPTER THREE

Celine squeezed through the inn window, scraping her leg on the sill as she clambered into the room. Sarah turned from the vanity where she was sitting, waiting for Celine's return. "Thank goodness you're back. I was getting worried." Her face filled with relief.

Celine slid the window shut, before plucking two stray leaves out of her hair. "I wasn't that long. Did Gunther even notice I left?"

"No, he knocked on the door once, but I did what you asked and told him you were sleeping. He seemed to be happy with that," Sarah admitted.

"Good." Celine peeled out of her clothes and began dressing for dinner. "I brought you something." She reached into the satchel, producing a silver hairpiece she had bought from a vender at the fair. Delicate flowers were engraved along the edge of the comb.

"Thank you." Sarah took the trinket, examining it with delight.

"I wish you could have come with me. It was amazing." Celine turned and lifted her waves of golden hair so Sarah could lace her dress. "The carnival had so many performers. One's I've never seen before. *Magical* ones." She lowered her voice and spoke the last words in a whisper.

"Magic?" Sarah's eyes were wide. "What kind of magic?" Although the royal family had recently lifted the ban on practicing magic in Lovan, it still wasn't widely accepted—forced on the fringe of society and frowned upon with suspicion by most of Lovan's population. King Erich even had to send his army to put down riots in a few towns and villages after he lifted the ban.

Celine sat at the vanity and let Sarah work the comb through her hair. "They had all the usual performers; fire dancers, acrobats, even a tightrope walker. But they had some that were definitely *real* magic as well." She paused, enjoying the attention as Sarah waited breathlessly for her to continue.

"The best performer was the shapeshifter, a girl who could change form. Into any living thing you could think of."

"Really?" Sarah's voice was full of astonishment. "Anything, no matter how big or how small it was?" The comb stopped in Celine's hair as Sarah's eyes rounded.

“Anything.” Celine nodded for emphasis.

“And—they were keeping her as a slave.” A dart of anger flashed through Celine as she remembered the young girl trembling under Karl’s onslaught of abuse.

Sarah’s horrified eyes met Celine’s in the mirror. “That’s not even legal.”

“I know.” Celine nodded. “I overheard Karl, the man whose making her do performances, speaking to the fortune-teller; they’re just using her for entertainment to make money for themselves. Well, *he* is anyway. It was hard to know what the fortune-teller thought about the situation. I wonder if Father knows things like this are going on.” She frowned, wondering if she could tell Gunther to send guards to free the girl from Karl’s evil clutches without causing a major incident.

“I know things aren’t always great for people who have magic—that’s why so few have come forward—even with the new mage guild.” Sarah admitted as she wound Celine’s golden hair into curls, pinning each section into a crown around her head. “But your father would never allow slavery, you know well how he feels about that.”

“I’m just worried that by the time I tell father it will be too late for her.” Celine toyed with her necklace as she leaned back in her seat.

“I’m not sure *we* can do anything about it.” Sarah pinned the last curl, smoothing and patting it into place.

“Why not?” Celine’s eyes gleamed as an idea occurred to her. “Why *can’t* we do something about it? If I could get her out, we can take her to the castle with us. We’re only a day or two away at most. And with all those guards Gunther insisted on bringing along, there’s no way they could fight us. We’ll bring her here tonight when everyone’s asleep and leave first thing in the morning. Karl won’t even notice until it’s too late.” Her voice rose with excitement as she worked out her plan.

“Can’t Gunther’s guards just go free her?” Sarah suggested.

“Yes.” Celine bit her lip. She knew it was a wise suggestion, but the tug of adventure was too much to resist. “But, if they get involved, it might upset a lot more people. You know we can’t just take her without causing a fuss. But if you and I go, we can just slip into the carnival tents and then right back out again. If you agree to accompany me, Gunther might let me go to the fair tonight. You know how he thinks you’re sensible, and he’s always in a better mood after a good dinner.” She tripped over the words in

her excitement. After all the long boring days of sitting at social events, the thought of doing something not only exciting, but useful was irresistible.

“Only if Gunther says we can go.” Sarah relented. “And you know he probably won’t. Didn’t he call carnival performers *unsavoury*?”

“Thank you.” Celine ignored Sarah’s hesitation as she bounced to her feet and clapped her hands in delight. “You won’t regret it.”

Confident that she had escaped a potentially sticky situation, Sarah led the way as the two girls went down to dinner.

“I made this especially for you.” Henrietta set a heaping plate in front of Gunther, roasted meat on a bed of buttery mashed potatoes. Despite the copious number of treats Celine had devoured at the carnival, her mouth watered as she smelled rosemary and sage dressing smothered in rich gravy. Seating herself at the table, she pointed her most brilliant smile at Gunther.

“Feeling rested?” Gunther piled his fork high with a little of everything before shovelling it into his mouth, closing his eyes in bliss as he chewed.

“Yes, it was so lovely to have a peaceful afternoon off to rest.” Celine lifted her fork and knife and cut daintily into her roast, being careful not to drip gravy on her dress.

Gunther eyed her suspiciously but said nothing as he devoured another massive bite. “Delicious as always, Henrietta.” He called out to the innkeeper, who beamed at the compliment. She brought another pitcher of gravy, pouring a generous dollop over Gunther’s food before setting it down.

Celine waited until Gunther emptied his plate and was digging his spoon into the pudding, a sticky concoction oozing in a puddle of golden syrup. “I was wondering if I might go for a stroll after dinner?” She wiped her fingers on her napkin. “Just for a breathe of fresh air. Sarah can come with me to be proper.” She fluttered her eyelashes.

“Well.” Gunther cleared his throat as he took another bite of his pudding. “If you keep to the main street, you should be all right. I’ll send a few guards with you,” he added four lumps of sugar to his mug of tea.

“But aren’t the guards tired?” Celine put on her most reasonable voice. “I don’t think it’s fair to make them do extra work after all the traveling today; and it draws so much attention every time I take them anywhere. It’s just I’ve never been to Harvin before and I’ve heard it’s such a lovely town. The main street is well lit, and the crowds have thinned.” She gestured at the street lamp casting its golden glow across the cobblestones.

Gunther leaned against the back of his chair, his bushy eyebrows lowering. “I suppose if you promise to keep to the main street and Market Square.” He relented, seeing the pleading expression on her face. “Stay away from the carnival, though. I don’t trust them. And if you’re not back in an hour, I’m sending *all* the guards after you. See what kind of attention you get then.” He stirred milk into his tea and took a sip.

“I can’t believe Gunther let you talk him into this.” Sarah grumbled as they strolled down the main street. Celine fingered the key the fortune-teller had given her as her sword swung at her side, Gunther insisted that if she wasn’t going to take the guards, she should at least be armed as a precaution.

“You’re going to love the fair.” Celine had a skip in her step as the two girls approached the market. “We’ll find the girl first and make a plan, then when it’s safe we’ll get her out and bring her to the inn.”

“What is she going to do when we get her there? You can’t just let poor girl fend for herself.”

“Easy peasy. She’ll come to the castle and live with us. I’m sure if she wants a job Daphne will have plenty for her to do,” Celine dismissed Sarah’s concerns with an airy wave of her hand. “Come on, I think the carnival tents are this way. Get us some of those things first so we blend in.” Celine pointed at some sugary fried pastries skewered onto sticks.

After purchasing their pastries, Celine wove through the venders to the tiny wooden platform where the girl had performed earlier. The platform was empty. She glanced around, wondering what her next step should be. The cluster of tents pitched at the far end of the square drew her eyes. They were not decorative like the fortune-teller’s tent, but more practical affairs made of rough grey and brown canvas. It was clear whoever used them was treating the tents as a home. There was even a makeshift clothesline strung between two of the tents.

Celine drew up the hood of her cloak to avoid drawing attention, then the girls strolled toward the tents—stopping to look at merchandise the venders had on offer along the way. Celine pretended to spot something beyond the tents and wandered past, peering around to search for the mysterious girl. There, inside the last tent, she saw her. The shadow of a slight girlish figure silhouetted through the patched canvas.

“Stay here and keep watch.” She lowered her voice and nudged Sarah, who was turning pale with nerves. “I think she’s in that one.” She used her

chin to nod toward a medium sized tent. Reluctantly, Sarah stood guard while Celine crept closer, making sure there were no curious bystanders.

“Pst...” She whispered to the girl who jerked her head up, big brown eyes rounded in surprise as she took in Celine’s fine clothes.

“What’s your name?” Celine asked the girl, giving her an encouraging smile.

“They call me Cherry.” The girl’s voice was soft and sweet. She nervously fingered the long brown hair waving over her shoulder.

“I’m here to get you out.” Celine stooped and stuck her head in the tent, taking in her surroundings. Whatever financial success Karl enjoyed at Cherry’s expense was not shared. The tent was shabby, the canvas stained and frayed.

“Pardon?” A frightened expression filled Cherry’s big brown eyes.

“I’m getting you out of here.” Celine whispered loudly. “Come on.”

“But you can’t.” Cherry’s lip trembled as she put her hand to the copper collar around her neck. “Karl put the collar on me. If I disobey him, it hurts.”

“Can’t you take it off?” Celine took a step closer.

Cherry shook her head. “He got it warded. It only comes off with a key, and Karl carries it.”

“This key?” Celine grinned as she slid the key the fortune teller had gifted her out of her pocket. It glittered in her palm.

“How did you get that?” The girl rose to her feet, a hungry expression in her eyes.

“It was a little present. Will we see if it works?” Celine motioned with a finger for Cherry to turn around.

Cherry obediently turned her back to Celine, holding her hair up to expose her slender neck. Celine’s hands shook with excitement as she fitted the tiny key into the mechanism on the girl’s collar. With a shiver of energy that tingled through her fingers and up her arm, the latch to the collar snapped open with a tiny click.

“Come on—hurry.” Celine held out a hand and led the girl to Sarah, waiting with an extra cloak. “Keep your head down.” Celine ordered Cherry bundling her into the flowing cloak. With Cherry safely sandwiched between them, made a swift beeline back to the inn.

“Hey!” a loud, angry voice shouted behind them. “Where do you think you’re going? She’s mine.”

“Oh no, it’s *him*.” Cherry’s face paled as footsteps thundered behind them.

“Run,” Celine shouted. “I’ll stay here and take care of Karl.” Not waiting to see if the girls followed her instructions, Celine swung around, her sword slithering from its scabbard as she took up a defensive position.

Sliding to a stop in front of her, the black-haired man eyeballed her raised sword. “So it’s like that, is it?” He raised an eyebrow as he reached for his own weapon, a wickedly curved scimitar. Realizing Karl was heavier and more powerful than she was; Celine knew she would have to depend on speed and skill if she wanted to hold her own against him.

Not waiting for him to attack, she struck first, dancing forward, pointed edge of her weapon glinting as it skimmed the air. Lazily, Karl batted her away, sending Celine backwards with a blow to her sword. Fear prickled at the back of Celine’s neck, as her arm tingled with the force. He was far more well-trained than she thought. Mind racing, she darted forward again, this time going for his left side, his weak side she hoped. With a flick, he knocked her sword back, the clash of weapons ringing in her ears.

“Not going the way you hoped, is it?” Karl’s evil grin sent chills down her spine as he took another step forward; closing in on Celine. “I see you stole my best money maker. Not nice.” He tutted as Celine bravely held up her weapon, watching for an opening in his defense.

“No matter. I can think of other ways to make money. Say a princess look-a-like? I think people would pay to see that. Or maybe I could send a message to your father. I’m sure he’d pay a pretty penny to get his daughter back.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Celine took a step back and tripped over an uneven cobblestone; righting herself on shaking legs.

“No, I suppose that might be troublesome. I’ll need something to make up for the lost income though, I might just take my chances.” He narrowed his eyes and struck.

Celine barely blocked the blow which left her arm in agony from force of its strike. She knew she couldn’t fight Karl much longer. It was now or never; she gritted her teeth and sprang, propelling herself forward with all the speed she could muster.

“You little—” The scimitar clattered to the ground, skidding toward the gutter as the man clutched his arm, a patch of red spreading underneath his fingers.

Celine leaped forward, snatching up his weapon in one hand and holding the other one toward him. “Not today,” she said, her voice even.

“Oy! What’s happening?” a shout behind her caught the man’s attention; his face filled with fear as he took in the sight of Gunther and his men closing the distance between them. Still clutching his arm, the man rushed down the nearest alleyway—Gunther’s soldiers tearing after him in hot pursuit.

“I should have known you were going to get into trouble.” Gunther took Celine by the arm, steering her back toward the inn. “Are you all right, he didn’t hurt you?” He scanned her for injuries, relaxing when he saw she was still intact.

“I got him way worse than he got me.” Despite Gunther’s dour expression, Celine couldn’t feel a glow of pride at her accomplishment.

“Even so; I should have been there. Your father’s going to have my hide before this delegation trip is over, you won’t be leaving your room again until I get you safely back to the castle.” Gunther griped as he shepherded Celine toward the warm glow that spilled out of the inn’s doorway.

“I’m sorry. But really, it’s all right. I was taking care of him just fine,” Celine protested as she was guided inside and sat in a chair.

“Now, tell me everything. I need to know who I’m dealing with here.” Gunther’s voice was stern. He raked his hand through his thick black hair huffing.

Celine sighed, knowing there was no chance of getting away until Gunther was satisfied. “I found a carnival girl being held against her will. I couldn’t let that be on my conscience. So I freed her.”

“A girl?” Gunther lowered his bushy eyebrows. “Was that who came rushing in here with Sarah. Little thing about this tall?” He measured the air with his calloused hand.

“Yes. The carnival master was using her for magic. I thought I was doing the right thing.” Celine turned her big blue eyes to Gunther.

“The right thing would have been coming to me first.” Gunther grumbled. “You know we wouldn’t allow that in Lovan if we found out about it.”

“I know.” Celine slumped in her chair. “But that takes so *long*. And the girl needed help now. They were mistreating her, you know *I* can’t allow that.”

“I’m still going to have to tell your father. And this carnival girl will be your responsibility. Did you even have a plan of what you were going to do with this girl once you freed her?”

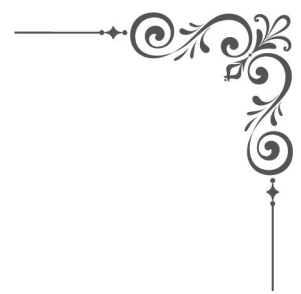
“She can return to her family.” Celine shrugged. “Or come to the castle with us. If that doesn’t work, we’ll think of something.”

Gunther exhaled loudly. “You can’t take in every stray you find; the castle would burst at the seams in no time.”

“Well then, something else has to change.” Celine set her face stubbornly. “And we’re going to have to do something about the way they treat people when they have magic. It can’t go on forever like this, it’s not fair.” She pressed her lips together.

“You can’t change people overnight, even it is the right thing. But I suppose you have a point. We’ll take her to the castle with us, then I’ll talk to King Erich when we get there. Now, no more jaunts; we’re leaving first thing in the morning, and I want no more incidents while you’re in my care. King Erich will never trust me again.” Gunther gave her one last warning look before leaving the room, muttering under his breath.

Celine straightened her shoulders. That wasn’t nearly as bad as she expected. Now if she could just get through the conversation about the pseudo-engagement with Prince Alex, life would be smooth sailing again.



CHAPTER FOUR

The wooden door creaked as it opened. Henrietta had improvised a bed in the corner of the room for Cherry, who was currently settled in an armchair chair being plied with tea and sweet buns. She raised her eyes, looking timidly through her lashes when Celine came through the door.

“Did you get Karl?” Cherry asked, setting down a half-eaten scone slathered in cream and jam.

“No, Karl got away.” Unwilling to wait for morning to learn the outcome of the chase, Celine had checked in with Gunther’s men to find out what had happened to her would-be abductor. “They said it was like he disappeared into thin air. Is that his power?”

Cherry swallowed the bite of scone. “I don’t know. Karl didn’t like us to know too much about him, and he kept to himself when he wasn’t minding us. The only person Karl talked to was Gerta, and he didn’t trust her either. Not really.”

“Did Karl work alone, I mean, when he wasn’t with the performers?” Hungry for any useful information, Celine pressed the matter.

“No.” Cherry crinkled her brow as she thought. “I never saw his associates, but I heard them discussing it—setting times for meetings. I think at least one of them owned an estate in the country.”

“Them?” Celine asked.

“Him and Gerta—the fortune-teller.”

“But, if Gerta’s working with him, why did she give me the key?” Celine sat on the bed and unlaced her boots.

“I don’t think Gerta really liked Karl; she just knew how to stay on his good side. And I have no idea how Gerta would have gotten the key—he always had it around his neck. But Gerta is mysterious—she has her own reasons for doing everything. I’ve known her for a long time, and she still feels like a stranger.”

“And is the fortune-telling real? Is Gerta an actual seer?” Celine pulled off a boot, setting it aside before she loosened the laces on the other one.

“Gerta told me once she sees possibilities and likelihoods, but people are always free to make their own choices and change the outcome.” Cherry

helped herself to another scone, scooping a blob of lemon curd over the flaky dough.

Celine leaned back against the pillows, putting her hands behind her neck. “It just doesn’t make sense that Gerta would do that.” She murmured, mind spinning with possibilities.

Celine shifted on her horse as they approached the castle. Her nerves had increased with each mile they drew nearer to the capital city of Cardon. What were King Erich and Queen Isabella going to say when they found out how dismally she had failed at her first attempt of diplomacy? She hated disappointing her parents. Her hands tightened on the reins as the castle gates loomed in front of her. A guard saluted smartly as he hauled them open, allowing the party to ride through.

“Will you come with me when I give my report?” Celine asked Gunther in a whisper as they clattered into the courtyard.

“Of course. Just give me an hour to debrief the men.” Gunther’s voice was kind. He swung down from his mount and handed the reins to a waiting groom.

Relieved by Gunther’s offer of support, Celine dismounted and turned to Sarah and Cherry, who were disembarking from the carriage. “Can you get Cherry settled? I’m going to see Father and Mother.”

“Of course.” Sarah smiled and held out a hand to Cherry, who was staring at the teeming activity in the courtyard with a timid expression in her eyes. Celine left the girls and went up to her room, flopping on her bed with a groan. Even with Gunther’s offer of help, she was dreading the next few hours. A soft knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

“Come in.” The door opened, and Cherry’s big brown eyes peeked around the edge of the wooden panel.

“Cherry?” Celine flung back her long golden hair as she smiled politely. “Did Sarah introduce you to Daphne? She’s the housekeeper and she’ll find a chamber for you.”

“Yes.” Cherry’s voice was sweet. “I just thought you might need some help in here. I could unpack your things for you—unless you don’t want me to.” She bit her lip.

“No, of course, help would be lovely.” Truthfully, Celine would have preferred a few moments to herself, but hated to hurt the girl’s feelings. She looked so scared and shy. “They’ll carry the trunks up shortly, so we can unpack later. But in the meantime, can you do my hair? I have a meeting

soon and need to prepare.” She gestured ruefully towards her riding habit, dishevelled and muddy after the day’s travel.

“Oh, yes. I used to do Gerta’s hair all the time.” Cherry’s eyes lit up as she stepped inside the chamber.

Celine took a seat at the vanity as Cherry picked up the silver brush and stroked it through her hair, working out the tangles.

“Were you with Gerta long?” Celine’s kept her voice conversational, as she relaxed under Cherry’s ministrations.

“A few years. My mother and father died in the riots, and Gerta took me in. She was an old family friend.”

“But then how did you get mixed up with...”

“Karl?” Cherry lowered her lashes. “Gerta was barely getting by before the riots; but things were terrible after. We were forced to move, and when Karl offered Gerta an opportunity with the carnival, she thought it was the best thing for both of us.” Cherry shrugged, as she began pinning Celine’s tresses onto the top of her head. “Gerta was good to take me in, but I suppose I was a burden to support.” Her eyes were sad in her thin face.

“But wasn’t Gerta angry when Karl put that collar around your neck and made you perform?” Celine gaped, shocked at the fortune-teller’s apparent callousness.

“Oh yes. She tried to stop him, I heard her arguing about it with Karl a few times. But she was frightened. Karl is very... strong, and Gerta didn’t have anywhere else to go. You know how people are about magic in Lovan—not that it’s your fault,” Cherry added quickly. “Just because it’s not outlawed anymore doesn’t mean people like magic—or the people who can use it.” A note of bitterness entered her voice. “Karl knew if we didn’t have him on our side, there’s a good chance we would have starved or worse.”

Celine turned in her seat, putting her hand on Cherry’s shoulder. “Well, you’re safe here. If anyone does anything to you, just let me know, I’ll have something to say about it.” A fierce expression crossed her face.

“Thank you.” A faint pink stained Cherry’s pale cheeks. She drew back as a loud knock sounded on the door.

“My trunks are here.” Celine stood up, patting her hair. A bit outdated, she thought, looking at the simple style, but it would do for her mother and father.

“If you help me with my dress, Sarah will show you where to unpack the clothes when she gets back.” With Cherry’s help, Celine quickly

changed out of her travel-stained clothes, donning a floaty dress of soft blue silk. Her sister-in-law Lucie had done wonders for court fashion, bringing in her own unique sense of style mixed with elegant, easy fitting fabrics. Sliding her feet into her slippers, Celine left Cherry in the room and glided toward the royal apartments where her father and mother were waiting.

“Father? Mother?” Celine opened the heavy panelled door. Gunther had already arrived, lounging back in a leather chair with a cup of tea and a slice of iced cake in hand.

“Hello darling.” Queen Isabella, usually poised and calm, ran to meet her, squeezing her daughter so tightly she gasped for air. “We missed you.” She pulled back, looking at her daughter’s face, so like her own.

“Hello poppet, nice to have you back again.” King Erich, a big blonde bear of a man, greeted her from his seat by the fire. Even Queen Isabella’s little dog, Fifi, yipped and pawed around Celine’s ankles, begging for a cuddle.

“Hello Father.” Celine lifted the tiny dog and settled her in her lap, sneaking her a crumb of cake from the plate her mother offered.

“You will give the full report to the council tomorrow,” King Erich began. “But a rundown first would be nice. I’ll need more details about that mysterious message Gunther sent.” His deep voice rumbled through the room. Celine flinched. Her father was the kindest man she knew, and she hated to disappoint him.

Celine gulped. “*Mostly* everything was fine,” she began, hoping her news would be too disturbing to her mother and father. “But there was one teeny tiny thing that went wrong.”

King Erich raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to continue. “Queen Abigail seems to think that I want to be engaged to Prince Alexander. For a marriage alliance.”

“Seems to think?” Queen Isabella questioned.

Celine sighed, knowing she would have to tell them the full story. “It happened when we were having tea. It was so boring and I got distracted, and that’s when I agreed to... to marry Prince Alex without even meaning to.” Her big blue eyes widened. “I know it’s my fault—but when I asked if they could keep the news quiet until I informed you first, King Ruben made an announcement to all their friends.” She pouted with annoyance.

“But, why didn’t you just tell them you didn’t mean to agree to an *engagement*?” King Erich furrowed his brow.

“I started to—once—but Queen Isabella started talking about Penelope, implying it was our fault Penelope died. She knew I wasn’t thrilled about the engagement, but she was determined to make the alliance happen. I think she’s worried the Iasians won’t accept her and King Ruben as the new royals and wants to make a good impression.”

“And Prince Alexander, what does he think of the engagement?” Queen Isabella leaned forward, concern in her eyes.

“I don’t even know.” Celine rubbed her hand on Fifi’s soft white fur. “I only saw the prince once, and he barely spoke to me.”

King Erich leaned back thoughtfully, steepling his hands under his chin. “Well, if Abigail thinks she can bully you—us into an engagement just to create an a good impression, she needs to think again. That’s not how we do things in Lovan.”

“But what are we going to do? I don’t want to be the one responsible for us *not* having an alliance. Queen Isabella even reminded me how much we need the Iasians for our trade routes.” Despite the relief that flooded her when hearing King Erich’s response, Celine’s eyes were shadowed with worry. She would hate to cause a rift between the two kingdoms.

King Erich waved a hand, dismissing her concern. “The Iasians need us as much as we need them. Ruben and Abigail know their way around their court—after all, he was the duke long before he became king. But they can’t throw their weight around like that. Taking advantage of you because you’re young and green just isn’t fair.” King Erich set his mouth in a firm line. “If you *wanted* to get engaged to Prince Alexander, it would be a completely different matter of course. We would be delighted. But we would never force you into a marriage alliance. Not after what happened with Frederich and Penelope. And to be honest, we’re working on ways to be less dependent on the Iasians for trade. This just confirms what I knew all along. We need to diversify our trade routes.”

For the first time in over a week, the knot of apprehension in Celine’s chest loosened. Things were going to be all right. She bit into her iced lemon cake, her appetite suddenly returning.

“Hello sis,” a voice behind her interrupted Celine mid chew.

“Lucie?” Fifi scrambled for cover as Celine leapt up, nearly tipping over the plate. Delighted, she turned to her sister-in-law. “And what about Frederich? Is he coming too?”

“Frederich’s working at the harbour today.” Lucie rolled her eyes. “Again. He can’t stay away from the ships. He’s dying to see you though, he said he’ll be here for dinner. Not that I’ll be eating anything.” A pleased look crossed her face.

“Why not... Oh.” Celine glanced down to where Lucie’s hands were cradling her non-existent belly. “Are you?”

Beaming, Lucie nodded. “I couldn’t wait to tell you.”

Overcome with joy, Celine gave her Lucie another tight squeeze. “I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunt. I can’t wait.”

Still brimming with happiness after a lovely dinner with her family, Celine returned to her room, humming a tune. She opened the door to see Cherry start back from the vanity, dropping her silver hairbrush on the polished wooden surface with a clunk.

“Oh, you startled me.” Cherry put her hand to her chest.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you.” Feeling oddly wrong-footed, Celine apologized, although why she should apologize for coming into her own chamber she didn’t know.

“I was just tidying up a bit.” Cherry moved the hairbrush to a different position on the vanity.

“You can go rest if you like.” Celine sat down to remove her slippers. She had been looking forward to spending a few moments alone.

“Oh no, your highness, I’m all right, not tired at all.” Cherry fidgeted with a collection of crystal bottles, adjusting them on a mirrored tray. “I like to help.”

“I’m going to get ready for bed now. Has Daphne shown you a chamber?” Celine pretended to yawn as she glanced around the chamber, wondering what Cherry had been doing in there. The room didn’t look any different from what it usually did, and the trunks were still sitting by the bed, unpacked.

“Yes, your highness, a very nice chamber. I just sent for some hot chocolate for you to drink. Sarah said you like to drink hot chocolate before bed.” Cherry moved to the bed and folded back the covers.

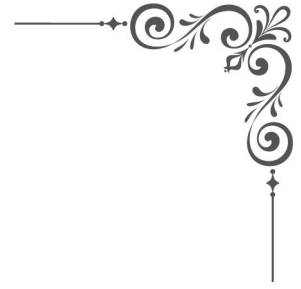
“Hot chocolate would be nice.” Celine forgot her annoyance as her heart warmed at the girl’s thoughtfulness.

“I’ll just see if it’s ready.” Cherry moved to the door, leaving Celine to change into the lacy nightgown laid out on the bed.

Tucked up under the coverlet, Celine sipped the hot chocolate, frowning a little at the bitter aftertaste that lingered on the back of her tongue. “Is there a different cook in the kitchen?” She wrinkled her nose. “This doesn’t taste like it usually does.”

“I’m not sure, your highness.” Cherry’s doe eyes adopted a worried expression. “Would you like me to find out? I can order you another one?” She moved as if to take the cup from Celine’s hand.

“No, no, this is fine.” Celine took a large gulp, not wanting to offend Cherry, who was fidgeting and anxious again. She finished the drink and set it on the silver tray. Her eyes drooped, and she yawned, settling her head on the pillow as Cherry gently removed the tray, closing the door softly behind her as she left the room.



CHAPTER FIVE

Celine's head ached as her mind dragged itself back into consciousness.

She forced her gritty eyelids to crack open, wincing as piercing light flooded her senses. Slowly, slowly, she peeled her head off the pillow. It felt strange, light. Raising her hand to the crown of her head, she froze in shock. Last night there had been cascades of golden waves tumbling down her back. Today, there was only a fine scratchy stubble. With a cry of distress, her other hand flew to her head, clutching her naked skull. Frantically her eyes darted around the room, everything seemed normal, someone had pulled the curtains back allowing sunshine to spill across the soft carpeted floor. Her eyes searched the room, looking for anything out of place, finally landing on the figure of a slender girl sitting in an armchair near the window.

"What's happening?" Celine forced the words out of her dry mouth.

"Ah.. you're awake." The girl set aside the book she was paging through. "I thought I maybe gave you too much. I'm not really used to using potions; it would be *so* easy to slip up."

Celine's bleary eyes focused on the girl. She had a slight figure, wide startlingly blue eyes and a waterfall of golden hair; she realized with a start; it was exactly like looking into a mirror. "Who *are* you?" she breathed, letting the bedclothes crumple into a heap as she flung them aside.

"I'm Celine, of course." The girl smiled a wide toothy grin full of gleaming white teeth as she sauntered across the room, running a hand down the length of her hair.

"But—it's not possible." It dawned on Celine that it *was* possible, but the *why* escaped her. "Cherry? You're the only person who could do this. But why?" Her voice was pleading.

"Why?" Cherry scoffed. "Why *wouldn't* I want to be you. A pampered princess who everyone loves so much. Especially when the alternative is to be stuck here as some kind of servant for the rest of my life. I'm no better off here than I was with Karl. Eventually someone would find out what I can do and I'd end up right back where I started." She spit out the words, eyes hardening.

“You can’t possibly think this is going to work.” Celine narrowed her eyes as the fog lifted. “You might look like me, but you can’t act like me. They’re going to notice.”

“Will they?” Cherry raised an eyebrow, no hint of her former timidity in sight. Her face took on a delighted, happy expression as she bounced across the room in a parody of Celine; swishing her dress. “Oh look, my favourite new dress. I’m so excited.” Her voice was high and mocking, but Celine had to admit, it sounded a bit like her.

“Well, I’ll just tell them it’s me.” Heedless of the fact that she was still wearing a nightgown, Celine bolted for the door.

“I don’t think you want to do that.” Quick as a flash, Cherry was standing in front of Celine, barring her way. Her blue eyes cold, she glared at the other girl. “Look at yourself.” She grabbed Celine by arm and pushed her toward the mirror. Celine’s heart sank at the unfamiliar sight that met her eyes. Not only had the distinctive waves of blonde hair had been stripped from her head, leaving her like a shorn sheep; her features had completely morphed overnight into something completely unrecognizable. Mud coloured eyes peered out from behind a sparse scattering of stubby eyelashes. Celine saw her button nose had grown into a monstrosity that resembled an overgrown potato more than a nose.

“What have you done to me?” Celine’s hands flew to her cheeks, which were red and swollen, her smooth skin replaced by a rough scaly texture.

“Oh, that.” Cherry waved a hand. “That’s from the hot chocolate. Very greedy of you gulping the whole cup in one go like that. You should really be more careful.” Cherry leaned forward to admire her own visage in the mirror, smoothing her golden locks with pride.

“You know they will find out, eventually. And when they do, it won’t be good for you.” In desperation, Celine tried reasoning with the other girl. “If you change me back right now, I promise to ask them to go easy on you. We don’t even have to tell anyone.” She raised pleading eyes to Cherry.

Cherry smirked. “They won’t find out. Because I don’t intend to be here much longer. I’ve decided that I *do* want to marry Prince Alexander after all. In fact, I intend to announce the upcoming alliance to the council this morning. I predict they will be delighted.”

Celine gaped at the other girl, her mouth hanging open like a fish.

“I think I want a brief engagement.” Cherry continued in a sickening sweet voice, smoothing her hands down the front of her dress. “They’re so

much more romantic, don't you think? You see, no one will suspect me in Iasia, they don't know you well enough. I'm going to be Princess Celine forever." She turned to Celine, eyes gleaming triumphantly.

Black spots swam before Celine's eyes as she realized her future was disappearing in front of her—taking a deep breath, she screamed for the guards; the sound wrenching from deep within her chest.

"Oh, I think you've made a big mistake there." Cherry gloated as she glided across the floor, silk dress—Celine's silk dress—rustling like petals around her. Footsteps pounding down the corridor and a trio of guards burst through the chamber door.

"There." Cherry pointed her finger at Celine, a calculated expression of fear pasted across her face. "This girl came into my room and threatened me. I was so frightened. Terrified" She gave the closest guard a beseeching look, tears swimming in the ocean blue eyes. "If you hadn't arrived, I don't know what I would have done."

"No, *I* called you." Realising she was still in her nightgown, Celine crossed her arms in front of her chest self-consciously.

"You?" The guards turned to her in confusion. "Who are you? And what are you doing in princess Celine's room? In her nightgown?" He grabbed her, his hand an iron band around her arm.

"I don't know where she came from." Cherry's lip trembled as she batted her long lashes at the guard. "I just turned around and there she was. You don't think she's dangerous, do you?" She lowered her voice and edged closer to the guards.

"But she's not Celine. I am," Celine insisted, a gut-wrenching sense of futility creeping into her heart. Who was going to believe her now, looking like this?

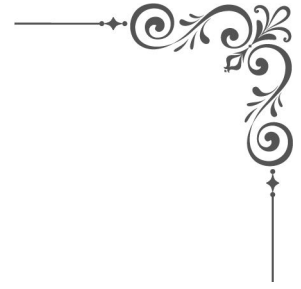
"Your highness, what would you have us do with this intruder?" The guards turned to Cherry, waiting for instructions.

"Check her for weapons, then banish her from the city. I don't think she actually wanted to hurt me. Although you might want to check your security procedures. It wouldn't do for my father to know you let someone potentially dangerous slip right into my chamber so easily." A hint of imperiousness entered Cherry's voice as the threat rolled off her tongue.

"Yes, your highness."

Celine whimpered as the guard's grip tightened, jerking her toward the door. Surprised by the rough treatment, Celine gave a squeak of pain, as

still in her bare feet and nightgown they dragged her between them down the corridor toward the back entrance of the castle.



CHAPTER SIX

Celine's mind raced as they rounded the corner of the long corridor leading toward the kitchen. She knew she had one chance to slip free, but her timing would have to be perfect. When they passed the statue of her grandfather, she took it. Catching the guards by surprise, she let her body go limp, using her weight to force them to slow down. The guard on her left, a bull-like man, paused, giving Celine the opportunity she was waiting for. She sprang up, kicking with all her strength. The guard grunted in surprise when her foot made contact, loosening his grasp. Making the most of her extensive training, Celine twisted away from the other guard and rolled under his grasping hands then darted back to the statue whipping aside a large tapestry of a battle scene in the alcove behind, sliding into a hidden recess in the back wall.

Celine held back a sneeze as she squeezed into the tiny opening behind the tapestry. Curling herself into a tiny ball, she pressed tight against the wall, forcing her breath to quiet when she heard the guards shouting and scuffling mere feet away. The secret passage was unknown to most castle residents, only the royal family and a select few members of the king's most elite personal guards were even aware of its existence. When the voices faded, thundering into the distance; Celine fumbled through pitch darkness, feeling for the latch to the tunnel. The door was always closed tight, so the drafts wouldn't give away the location of the tunnel. Inch by inch she lifted the ancient metal clasp, hoping it wouldn't creak and give her location away. At last, the door swung open, a cool draft caressing Celine's hot cheeks as she melted into the bowels of the castle.

The extensive web of tunnels led to all the royal apartments, including her father's council chambers, the armoury and even the kitchens. Anything the royal family needed to access in case of attack was accessible by the intricate system. *And this is an attack*, Celine thought grimly, rubbing a hand on her shorn head. She put her hand on the damp wall, shuddering at the spiderwebs that clung to her fingers as she crept down the twisting tunnel toward the royal apartments. It was early enough that her mother and father would still be at breakfast.

The corridors were lit, barely, by small airholes drilled through the stone at intervals. On the other side, paintings and tapestries covered the holes, fading seamlessly into the castle walls. Over the years, Celine and Frederick had spent hours in the tunnels first as part of their training and next as a running series of practical jokes. Celine had taken great delight in jumping out at Frederick was unaware. She grimaced, little did she know that practice of sneaking around quietly would come to be so useful.

A frenzy of high-pitched barking guided Celine to the royal apartments. Fifi must be in a strop, unusual for the placid little dog; but not unheard of. Celine peeked through the hole in the wall, her vision blocked by the small size of the opening. She could only see the back of Lucie's head and the corner of her father's chin.

"Fifi. What has gotten into you?" Queen Isabella scolded the small dog. "Don't you remember Celine after her trip? She hasn't been away that long." Fifi growled in response, not convinced by Isabella's persuasion.

"It must be the new perfume I got while I was away." Cherry protested in her best impersonation of Celine's voice. Celine gritted her teeth as Fifi growled again. After a scuffle, she heard a door close, and the barking grew muffled. Queen Isabella must have removed her from the room.

"That dog." Her mother came into view, passing only a foot or two away from Celine's position at the wall. "I don't know what got into her. She only saw you last night."

A tinkling laugh that must be Cherry and scraping chair let Celine know someone was sitting down. "I'm sure she'll come around." Cherry seemed unconcerned that the family pet had forgotten her. "But no matter, I really came to tell you *my* news."

"News?" King Erich's pleasant voice rumbled. Celine heard utensils clinking as the family resumed their meal.

"Yes. I've decided to marry Prince Alexander."

A thump—as a coffee cup thudded to the table. "Are you sure about this? Last night you were determined to have nothing to do with the Iasian prince. You don't have to do this just for the alliance you know we would never sacrifice you like that." Queen Isabella's voice was reasonable, but Celine heard confusion in her voice.

"I think it's a splendid opportunity for us to cement the Iasian alliance for good. And Alexander is very handsome." Another annoying, tinkling laugh.

I don't giggle like that. Celine thought, glaring at the tiny hole in the wall. She wished she could see Cherry's face.

"Well, don't jump into the alliance, take some time to at least *think* about it," King Erich insisted. "How about if we discuss it again after the morning council meeting?"

"But wouldn't the council meeting be the best time to tell them?" Cherry's honeyed tone wound round the room. "I'm sure your council would be delighted if we restored the alliance."

Ice trickled down Celine's spine as she realized Cherry was putting her devious plan into place sooner rather than later. If Celine wanted to make her presence known, it would have to be now. She took a deep breath, gathering the courage to say her piece quickly before Cherry could sway King Erich and Queen Isabella's opinion.

A knock at the door cut her off.

"Your Majesty." It was Nathaniel, captain of the guard. "I'm here to report a disturbance in the castle. A security breach left an unknown person within the castle walls."

"Do they mean us harm?" King Erich asked, instantly alert.

"We're not sure of their intentions yet. However, we discovered the woman in question in Celine's chamber this morning. She didn't seem lucid. It gave your highness quite a fright."

"Is this true Celine?" King Erich's voice was serious.

"Yes, Father." Cherry's voice was demure. "I thought they caught the lady, though. They took her away before I came to breakfast."

"Unfortunately, the woman is well trained. She slipped past the guards and escaped. They gave chase, but she disappeared and we still haven't tracked her. We believe she may be dangerous." Nathaniel's clipped voice seeped through the walls, filling Celine's heart with ice. She couldn't get caught now, not if she wanted to stop Cherry before she left for Iasia.

"Put every royal under double guard until we apprehend her." King Erich decided, leaving no room for objections. "Since the intruder was found in the princess's chambers, I consider her a grave danger to the crown; you have my permission to defend by whatever means necessary." Celine nearly gasped aloud, pressing herself tighter against the wall. This recent development left no opportunities for Celine to explain herself before finding herself at the wrong end of a sword.

“Thank you, Father.” Celine cringed at the simper in Cherry’s voice. That was *not* how she talked. Ever. Gritting her teeth, her mind raced to form a plan. There had to be some way of getting out of this mess.

THE COUNCIL MEETING

Celine melted into the darkness as she silently crept along the tunnel toward King Erich’s council chamber. She was barefoot, having no opportunity to get shoes. The grit underfoot scraped the soles of her feet, an unpleasant, rough sensation.

Before making a plan, Celine needed to learn the details of Cherry’s plan, and the council meeting was her best chance to find out. She pressed one eye to the beam of light filtering through the hole in the wall. This viewpoint was significantly better than the one in the royal apartments; located above the council chamber, giving Celine a bird’s-eye view of the entire room. She settled to wait, watching as the steward arrived to prepare the chamber for the meeting, carrying platters of sandwiches and trays of pastries along with a selection of hot and cold drinks. Queen Isabella prided herself on her hospitality and reminded Celine more than once that people never made good decisions on empty stomachs.

The council members trickled in, their footsteps muffled by the thick rugs covering the floor. After helping themselves to the refreshments, they took their seats around the long, polished table that stood in the centre of the room. Celine’s stomach growled as the buttery scent of hot pastries floated up. Because of all the commotion, there had been no chance of breakfast. She put a hand to her stomach, hoping they wouldn’t hear it grumbling over the murmur of conversation.

After what felt like hours, the door finally opened and in glided Celine followed by King Erich and Queen Isabella, who took their places in the high-backed chairs at the head of the council table.

King Erich cleared his throat, and the murmur faded to a hum as the members of the council turned to listen. “Celine will present her report of the diplomatic visit to Iasia before we begin our usual proceedings.” He nodded at Cherry, giving her the floor.

“Good morning.” Cherry plastered a wide smile across her face. “First, I am pleased to tell you all that the diplomatic visit was a success.” She beamed around at the council members. “In fact, I have secured an alliance with Iasia—one that will hopefully be long and prosperous.”

“An alliance?” Gunther lowered his bushy brows questioningly as he fastened his eyes on Cherry.

Good, thought Celine from her perch. Gunther knows I hated the whole marriage idea. Maybe he can get them to realize that it’s not me down there.

“Yes.” Cherry fluttered her eyelashes in his direction. “I reconsidered, really thought about it; and I decided that I *will* accept the offer of an engagement and marry Prince Alexander.” Again came the glittering smile. “I plan to travel to Iasia as soon as possible to begin the arrangements.” At this announcement, the council members exchanged disapproving looks. Celine leaned forward. She knew most of the council members were older and set in their ways. They would be cautious about rushing into anything.

Celine looked directly underneath her to where her father and mother were sitting; it was hard to see their faces from the angle she was, but she saw her father’s hand grip his cup until his knuckles whitened. Queen Isabella sat still and poised as always, but Celine could see by the slight tremble of her fingers that this announcement also shocked her.

“I’m sorry, Father—Mother—Cherry turned to the king and queen. I know you wanted me to wait; but I’m just so excited I had to share the news with everyone. She batted her lashes at the council members.

“But the alliance contract? When will that be written?” Jean Paul, one of Father’s oldest and most experienced council members, spoke up. “This is unheard of without a proper negotiation.” He took off his glasses and polished them.

“Yes, I thought you were going to wait until we could discuss it further.” Prince Frederick spoke from his seat at the other end of the table. Celine held her breath, hoping her brother would talk some sense into the girl. She needed some time to fix the situation before getting married off to the nearest suitor, even if he was a prince.

“I know it’s not protocol.” Cherry widened her big blue eyes. “I am very sorry. I didn’t mean to offend anyone. But when it comes to matters of the heart, sometimes protocol comes second.”

“Are you sure this marriage is what you want?” Father turned to the Cherry.

“Yes, Father, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

“It would make Iasian relations easier if we had that kind of alliance,” Jean Paul spoke up again. “There’s nothing stopping us from drawing up

our terms now. We can send them ahead by messenger and begin the negotiation process.”

“And just think of all the opportunities we would have to learn how the Iasians operate their mage guilds. I’ll have to discuss some opportunities about this with you later.” Lord Remy’s eyes glinted with excitement behind thick spectacles. Celine glanced at Lord Remy, the only council member who hadn’t appeared initially shocked by the false Celine’s announcement.

No, no, no Celine glared at the top of Cherry’s golden hair, unable to believe what was happening below. Eye glued to the tiny hole, she watched in disbelief as one by one she swayed them, reeling them in with the prospect of a rich trade deal with Iasia. Only her father, mother, brother and of course Gunther seemed to have genuine reservations regarding the alliance; but even they eventually gave in on the condition that Cherry allow them two weeks before making the journey back to Iasia. Finally, the council meeting ended, the members dispersing over more refreshments. Cherry drew into the murky black depths of the tunnel, heart aching. Two weeks. Two weeks to get her freedom and her identity back. She buried her head in her hands, wondering how she would ever accomplish this impossible task.

CELINE FOLLOWS TO IASIA

Celine tipped her head back, leaning against the rough tunnel wall. Her mind turned over various options. The most obvious would be to convince someone she was the real Celine and instead of that imposter so ruthlessly determined to take over her life.

Frederich. Celine decided.

Frederich would believe her, he had to. After all, they had so much shared history that Cherry knew nothing about. Now if she could only get him alone.

Celine stooped under a small archway that led to the royal apartments and swiftly wound her way to the library. Her sister-in-law, Lucie, was a dedicated bookworm and loved nothing more than to retreat her favourite part of the castle after a trying council meeting. And where Lucie went, Frederich followed.

Celine peeked around a stack of dusty smelling books that blocked the entrance to the library.

There she was, curled up in a patch of sunshine on a settee. Lucie flipped through the pages of her novel sipping hot milky tea. The fire blazing in the hearth offered a cozy warmth; Lucie had kicked off her slippers, leaving them sprawled across the floral rug on the polished marble floor. Silently, Celine tiptoed toward them, crouching behind a shelf to avoid being seen.

“Did you think there was something a bit odd about Celine this morning?” Frederich tapped his fingers together thoughtfully.

Lucie lowered her book, peering over the thick volume. “What kind of odd? I mean, your sister was always a bit impulsive.”

“Yes, but Celine’s stubborn, she rarely changes her mind so suddenly. She just finds creative ways to achieve what she wanted all along.”

“And you don’t think Celine wants to marry Prince Alexander? I’ve heard he’s lovely and very handsome.”

“She wasn’t at all interested last night; and today she was bound and determined to leave Lovan the minute she could slip away. She just seemed.... *off*.” Frederich narrowed his eyes.

“Celine’s probably just getting accustomed to being back home again. She’s had a taste of independence now, and maybe she thinks this is what she needs.” Lucie poked her nose back into the book, licking her finger and flicking a page.

Celine knew this was her chance. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her hands down her now grubby nightgown, poking her head from her hiding place. Not recognizing Celine, Lucie yelped in surprise at the sight of the dishevelled girl. Frederich sprang from his seat, ready to defend his wife.

“Wait, Frederich, it’s me. CeeCee.” Celine used her childhood nickname, hoping that would convince him she was truly his sister.

Frederich froze for an instant, taking one disbelieving look at Celine’s wild, unkempt appearance and spiky bald head before shouting for guards. He reached for the poker, brandishing it in front of him and his pregnant wife.

“Just listen to what I say for one minute.” Celine held her shaking hands in the air, showing her lack of weapons. “I will not hurt her or you. I promise.”

Eyes fierce, Frederich raised the poker threateningly. “Talk fast. And don’t make a move—I won’t hesitate to use this.”

Celine's heart broke a little—Frederich had never spoken harshly to her before. "It's the girl. Cherry, she's a shapeshifter that Gunther and I rescued from Harvin. She made herself look like me and then did this with a potion." She waved a hand, showing her appearance. "You have to believe me, Frederich. I'm Celine." The words rushed out as she heard the thud of the guards feet pounding down the corridor.

"Prove it then."

"How do you think I got in here?" Celine challenged Frederich, desperation lacing her voice. "You know we're the only ones that know the secret passage."

Frederich lowered his poker a few inches, just as the guards burst through the door.

"It's her." Eddie, a big burly guard, grabbed her by the arm.

"No, wait." Celine begged as she tried to shake off the iron vise gripping her arm. "Remember when you broke your arm? You told everyone you fell down the stairs? I know what really happened; you were in the stall with that horse after being told not to go near its stall. I covered for you."

"Everyone knows that story." Frederich nodded at Eddie to take her away.

"And the time you broke mother's favourite vase? I told Father I did it so you wouldn't get punished." The words tumbled out as the guards surrounded her.

"She's not me," Celine insisted. "That's why Fifi didn't recognize her. Ask Sarah, she was there with me in Harvin, she knows what Cherry can do."

"Wait." Frederich held up a hand to stop the guards.

"Your highness. Your father ordered us to take the woman down to the dungeon. I can't disobey the king's orders, not even for you." Eddie's tone was firm, his eyes hard as he continued to wrestle Celine toward the door.

"She's going to take everything away from me. From us." Celine struggled and kicked, but the guards were ready this time, holding her so tight she knew she would have bruises. She glared as she spotted a familiar blonde head of hair strolling into the room.

"You're not getting away with this." Celine hissed at Cherry, who cowered back against the wall. Cherry's face was frightened, but her eyes held an unmistakable gleam of triumph.

“That’s enough. So sorry your highness.” The guard bowed to Cherry as he hauled Celine away.

Celine glared at the cold iron bars surrounding her. Ignoring all her protests, the guards had unceremoniously deposited her in the dark cell, leaving her with a bucket and a jug of water. Celine wrinkled her nose at the dank smell emanating from the pile of straw in the corner. Hugging her knees, she huddled in the corner to consider her options. If only the guards had been a bit slower, she might have swayed Frederick. The two siblings had always been close. There had to be some way of convincing Frederick that Cherry was a fraud.

Resting her head on her arms, she watched the small square of light march across the wall. Eventually a guard arrived bearing standard prison fare, a fresh jug of water, a chunk of brown bread and a bowl of soup. Knowing she had to keep up her strength, Celine swallowed her pride and choked down the bland fare. Leaving her empty bowl and cup at the door, she curled up in the hay, squirming to avoid the prickly fibres digging into the thin fabric of the nightgown she still wore.

A clatter of footsteps and rattle of keys woke Celine from her doze; she peered through the murky gloom, trying to find out who was there.

“Frederick?” A tiny ray of hope awakened as the familiar form approached.

Frederick stopped by Celine’s cell. “I’ve done some thinking, and I think—I think I believe you.”

Celine’s breath caught in her throat as Frederick searched her eyes. He paused, swallowing hard before he continued.

“But Father—King Erich isn’t even willing to consider the idea. He just got Celine back. And she’s good—that is, if you’re right and she is Cherry. Everyone’s fooled, even Mother. I’m not even sure what to believe at this point.” Frederick rubbed his face with his hands.

“But, Frederick. You came to help.” Tears misted her eyes as Celine gripped the cold iron bars that separated them.

Frederick exhaled, “If you are Celine—and that’s a big if. How can we make Cherry change back to her original form. It’s the only way to convince Father and Mother. They want to have a trial, for you, and that’s going to take some time.”

“But we don’t have time. Cherry’s leaving in two weeks. Unless they going to delay her departure, we won’t have a chance to prove who she

really is.”

“I know.” Frederick shook his head. “And right now, she has them all convinced that you’re an insane person who somehow managed to break into the castle.”

“Well, I’ll have to work fast and get this done before she leaves then. I don’t want to end up married to stuffy old Prince Alexander.” A tear rolled down Celine’s cheek and dripped onto the stone floor.

Frederick crinkled his brow. “How do you know that’s what she was planning?”

“I used the tunnel to watch the council meeting.” Celine sniffed.

“Well, do you have an idea of how to stop her?”

Celine had thought long and hard about this. “I think so. We have to steal her collar back. When Cherry was performing at the carnival, she had a warded metal collar around her neck—I think whoever was running the carnival used it to control her. I opened the collar with a key the fortune-teller gave me so I could bring Cherry here with me.”

“What happened to the collar and the key?”

Celine closed her eyes thinking. “We were in one of the carnival tents when I took the collar off and I was in such a hurry I left it there where I found her. I still have the key though. It’s in my jewellery box. That is, if Cherry hasn’t taken it by now.”

Frederick leaned his head on the bars in frustration. “So, to find the collar we have to find the carnival and hope somehow they still have the collar and they’ll give it to us?”

“Something like that.” Celine chewed on her lip. “Are you in?” She gave her brother a hopeful look as she stuck her hand through the bar, extending two fingers in the secret greeting they had invented as children.

Frederick returned the gesture. “I’m in. Let’s get you out of here.” He jingled the keys at his side.

“How did you get those?” Celine raised an eyebrow.

“You know where Father keeps extra sets of keys in his private office?” Frederick answered her question with one of his own.

“Behind the painting of Grandfather Bertie,” Celine said with a grin as the iron lock clicked open and she stepped into the hallway.

“I asked Lucie to distract Father after dinner. She got him to take her to the map room. You know how Father is once he starts talking about his maps.” Celine rolled her eyes as Frederick closed and locked the door

behind them, leading her up the narrow staircase. “You can’t stay at the castle, so Lucie and I gathered a few things for you. You’ll be safer out of the city for the time being.”

Celine glanced down the empty passageway. “Where is everyone?” she asked. The guard’s station was abandoned. Much as Celine wanted her freedom, she hated to get any of the guards in trouble. After all, most of them had families of their own. They were only following orders. The guards had always been loyal to Celine and her family.

“I changed the rota. The guards haven’t realized no one is here yet. But we have to hurry, they’re going to be making rounds soon.” Frederich hurried Celine down a narrow hall toward the door leading to a small courtyard. Only a storage area, really. Moonlight cast shadows across the crowded space, and Celine jumped as a rat scurried by, darting under an empty cask.

“I’ve got you a horse and some money. If you’re careful, it should last for a while.” Celine followed Frederich as he strode across the courtyard toward the back of the stable.

“But what am I going to wear? I can’t ride like this.” Celine gestured at her nightgown and bare feet.

“Lucie’s got clothes for you, she’ll meet us in the stable. If you wear a hat and pull your hood up, no one will notice you’ve got no hair. I would have brought a wig, but I had so little time.” Frederich opened a creaky wooden door at the side of the stable building. They entered the stables, the warm comforting smell of horses surrounded Celine, reminding her of happier times. Only a small lantern lit the space occupied by rows of horses. A tabby cat emerged from the shadows to rub Celine’s ankles.

“Did you bring my sword?” Celine’s sword, her favourite possession, was given to her on her sixteenth birthday. Made to measure it was sharpened frequently and perfectly weighted to fit her hand.

“I got your sword.” Lucie rounded the corner, loaded with an armful of supplies. “I knew you wouldn’t want to go anywhere without it.” She shot Celine a sympathetic look, shaking her head in disapproval as she ran her eyes over Celine’s bald head and distorted features. “I can’t believe that girl did this to you. It’s a disgrace.”

“What about Father and Mother? Are they really still convinced Cherry is me?” Celine turned to Lucie as she hoped anxiously for an answer different to Frederich’s.

Lucie nodded; her eyes sad. “Cherry completely pulled the wool over their eyes. They wouldn’t even listen when I told them they should at least go to the dungeon and hear what you had to say. They’re so horrified that someone would go near their precious daughter that they can’t even see the possibility of an imposter.”

Lucie handed a pile of clothes to Celine. A serviceable pair of fawn trousers, a linen tunic and a hooded cape; all fine sturdy materials. “I didn’t want you to have anything noticeable,” Lucie explained as Celine gratefully accepted the clothes, eager to shed her filthy nightgown.

“You saddle the horse. I can help Celine dress,” Lucie addressed Frederich, who obediently disappeared into the tack room.

“I have a hat as well. You can wear it under the hood for extra protection.” Lucie waited as Celine stepped into the trousers. “And there’s two extra sets of everything in the satchel. I don’t know how long this is going to take, and I don’t want you to get caught without.” She handed Celine a bulging leather satchel. “How is your face? Does it hurt?”

Celine grimaced. “Only the fact that I’m hideous, a completely different person.”

“Can I see in the light?” Lucie asked, her voice gentle.

Celine nodded, and Lucie held out her hand. A ball of golden flame appeared, casting a bright light over the two girls. Celine eyes the flames. Even after all this time, Lucie’s magic never ceased to amaze her. Lucie reached out her other hand and stroked Celine’s shorn head, her eyes swimming with unuttered thoughts.

“Do you think the potion’s effects will fade? Can you consult Lord Remy or Althea?” Celine bit her lip.

“I will.” Lucie squeezed Celine’s hand.

“Take the side gate when you leave; the guards never look there. The key is in its usual spot.” Frederich interrupted the girls as he led a brown horse from its stall “I’m putting you on Winston here because he’s less noticeable than your horse.”

Celine took the reins from her brother and led the horse to the mounting block.

“We’ll do what we can from the castle.” Frederich continued as he followed her, “I think a few council members aren’t convinced Cherry is making a wise decision. Leave that with me, I’ll speak to them privately. I’ve sent word about the situation to Gunther at his estate. If we get his

testimony, it will make all the difference.” Frederick promised as Celine swung into Winston’s saddle. Uncomfortable with goodbyes, Frederick patted Celine on the leg.

And that is how she left home. No fanfare, no crowds, just her brother and Lucie standing in the courtyard as she slipped away into the darkness. Celine knew the next few days would change everything.

CELINE’S FIRST DAY OUT.

“You don’t have any spare rooms?” Exhausted, Celine slumped against the wooden counter of the inn. After travelling all night, she was hoping to find a place to sleep for a few hours. But the only inn in the village of Bannard was full, and the next village was at least two hours ride away. Celine looked around, taking in her surroundings.

The dining area, a large room dotted with wooden tables and smelling of soap and the remnants of breakfast—scrambled eggs and bacon—didn’t *look* busy. Maybe they just didn’t *want* to give her a room, she thought bitterly, folding her arms across her chest. Celine was used to her every whim being accommodated for sooner rather than later and was finding her new appearance had tangible drawbacks.

“Is there anywhere else to stay?” Celine looked hopefully out the door at the scattering of houses clustered around the small market square. It didn’t appear promising, but it never hurt to ask.

“Not really. Unless you want the stable.” The innkeeper didn’t seem too enthusiastic to even offer that.

“Fine.” Celine took the offer. “And I also want lunch.” She glanced hopefully at what she assumed was the kitchen door. “Lunch isn’t until noon.” The innkeeper leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands over the spread of his stomach. “You can come back for it then and it’ll cost extra for oats if you’re going to stable the horse.” He jerked his chin toward Winston, who was dozing in the courtyard.

“Yes, that would be lovely.” Celine turned to go.

“Wait. You haven’t paid yet.” The innkeeper called her back.

“Oh, of course.” Flustered, Celine fished in her purse for the coins. After stabling Winston she found a small cot in the corner of the stable and, covering herself with her cloak, lay down for some much needed rest.

After a nap and a wash with water from the well behind the stable, Celine’s spirits improved. Keeping her distance from the other clients, she took a seat at one of the wooden tables, avoiding eye contact with the few

others scattered around the room. Travelling merchants and possibly a farmer or two. Hoping news of her escape hadn't spread; Celine bent her head down, her hat shoved over her forehead.

"Here you are, dear." A short motherly woman, with grey hair pulled back in a bun placed a steaming mug of hot spiced coffee in front of her. Celine cupped the mug in her hands, enjoying the warmth before taking a sip of the bitter liquid. "You can add milk if you like." The woman nudged a small blue pitcher toward Celine. "Looks like you've had a long day already. I'm Jean, so if you need anything just give me a shout." Jean paused, as if waiting for a chat.

"Thank you, it's delicious." Celine hesitated. She wasn't sure she wanted to risk giving herself away, but she needed information, and this friendly woman seemed like a good place to start.

"Now, I've got the Ficandeu today. Would you like some of that, my dear?" Jean's round face creased in a smile. She fussed with the salt and pepper pots on the wooden table.

"Yes, please." The smell of ham and bacon from the Ficandeu—a local stew—wafting from the kitchen left Celine faint with hunger. She had devoured the dried meat Lucie had packed her in the first hour of her flight from the castle. Jean bustled away, deftly swiping a few plates from an empty table on her way back to the kitchen. Within moments a large earthenware bowl of the savoury stew arrived, and a platter piled high with fresh bread. Celine dug in gratefully.

"So, what brings you to these parts?" Jean asked nosily as she set down another plate of bread in front of Celine. She eyed Celine's clothing, although plain it was clearly well-made and expensive.

"I'm just travelling." Celine shrank under Jean's suspicious gaze. "To Iasia."

"Hmm." Jean lingered. "Dangerous place, Iasia, full of magic. You have to be careful of everyone." She shivered.

"There's magic here in Lovan too, isn't there?" Celine had always been curious to see what people *really* said about the recent development of the ban on magic in Lovan being lifted.

"Yes." A grudging expression flashed across Jean's face. "We have nothing to do with it here in our town, though."

"Is that right?" Celine took full advantage of the opportunity to gather information. "I hear there's a traveling carnival going through the towns

and villages—and they have mages for performers. Have you seen them?” She schooled her expression to look as innocent as possible.

“Oh, them.” Jean sniffed. “Some people like that sort of thing. But I steer clear of all that cheap nonsense. In my day, we put fortune-tellers where they belonged.”

Celine’s heart gave a thump of excitement. “When was the carnival here? I heard they have some talented performers, I would love to get a peek.” She ignored Jean’s superior expression.

“Recently. Three, four weeks maybe. Nasty folk. I wouldn’t trust them with a dog I didn’t like.” Jean’s voice was icy.

“They can’t *all* be bad.” Taken aback that this seemingly pleasant woman could hold so much animosity toward complete strangers; Celine was at a loss for words.

“I wouldn’t hedge my bets.” Jean pursed her lips as she gathered Celine’s empty butter plate.

“Do you know which way the carnival was going?” Celine pressed. She dipped her bread in the stew in an attempt to look casual.

“As long as they’re not here, I don’t care where they went. All I heard is they took the road north—Iasia direction. Better if they stay with their own kind, anyway.” Jean turned, balancing a stack of plates and leaving Celine to her thoughts.

Scooping another bite of stew with her bread, Celine chewed thoughtfully. It could be the same carnival—after all, there couldn’t be that many carnivals in the area and they would need to travel slowly, staying at least few days in each town before moving on to the next. Decision made; Celine pushed her chair back.

THE TRAFFICKERS

This is it. Thought Celine as she rode into Illes, just across the border from Iasia. Several valuable days had passed while Celine searched for the carnival. She nearly cried with happiness when she spotted the familiar dingy tents pitched in Market Square. The performers were out, surrounded by the usual crowd as they went through their routines.

After leaving Winston at the inn, Celine walked down the main street toward the square. Now came the real challenge, to find the collar; she patted the sword strapped her side. A precaution only, she convinced herself when she buckled in on earlier. Celine stopped and bought a paper wrapped packet of sugar roasted nuts, crunching them one by one. For once grateful

of the unwanted disguise, she melted into the crowd, edging toward the tents. Her best chance would be to find and take the collar while the performers and Karl were otherwise occupied.

Drawing the hood of her cloak over her head, Celine slipped behind a stall selling skewers of spiced roasted meat, its rich salty scent filling the air in thin lines of blue smoke. From there, it was a few steps to the fabric merchant, its stall lined with swathes of colourful fabrics made it an excellent place to hide. She ducked behind a pair of women fingering bolts of colourful dyed cotton before moving on, skulking closer and closer to the pitched tents.

Celine stood and glanced around, making sure there was no one watching the tents before casually strolling in their direction; forcing herself to amble slowly enough to avoid the suspicion of any bystanders. When she reached them, her heart was pounding, and her mouth dry. She checked one last to time to make sure no one was looking, before she ducked under the frayed flap of the largest tent, taking a moment to allow her eyes adjust to the dimly lit interior.

A row of beds lined inside the tent told Celine there must be several occupants. She moved efficiently toward a large canvas bag that seemed the most likely place to hold a valuable item. Digging through, she found nothing but clothes— worn dresses and shabby tunics. She moved her attention to the mattress, feeling underneath with her hand. Still nothing.

Celine sat back on her heels. She would have to move fast if she didn't want to get caught; and the likelihood of a valuable item being left in such an accessible place suddenly seemed improbable, almost bordering on ridiculous. But she had to try.

After sneaking into two more tents and finding nothing, discouragement gripped Celine. Not only did she not find the collar, there were no items of value anywhere. She scratched her head, wondering where they would keep them. Karl was too clever to leave something like that unguarded. She stood up, rubbing the ache in the small of her back. She slid out of the tent, and then, across the square, a colourful sign caught her eye.

Of course, the fortune-teller. Gerta did all her work in the tent and could easily guard any valuables. Now, Celine only had to figure out a way to get in.

I'll create a distraction. Celine thought, creeping around the back of the tent she had been in and rejoining the bustling marketplace. She sidled up to

a throng of people gathered around the fire dancers. Finding a wooden bench, she sat to think. Tendrils of smoke from the roasted meat drifted into in her eyes and she waved it away with her hand.

That's it. Her hand froze and her heart gave a thump of excitement.

I can smoke the fortune-teller out. Then I'll grab the collar and make a run for it. This plan *had* to work. She would make sure it did. Celine pressed her lips together, she only had a little more than a week left before Cherry went back to Iasia. Cherry would push for a brief engagement and once they completed the marriage ceremony, it would be impossible to back out of.

Time for distraction, thought Celine as she tied Winston next to a dappled mare at the railing in front of Market Square. "I might have to leave in a hurry," she explained to the horse, who nibbled her satchel hoping for sugar lumps. She tossed a coin to a boy in the tattered brown coat who was standing nearby. He jumped to attention.

"Can you look after my horse for me?" Celine spoke kindly. "I'll give you another coin when I get back."

"Of course, miss." The boy's face lit up with eagerness. Winston whickered, nosing the boy's hand for treats with his velvety nostrils.

Celine slung a cloth bag of supplies over her shoulder and strolled past rows of venders toward the fortune-teller's tent. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Karl, standing with a trio of acrobats. He was wearing his green velvet jacket and had a small bag slung across his chest. Celine hoped that bag didn't contain the collar, but she would have to think about that later. Turning her head, she carried on, watching a pretty brunette to enter the fortune-teller's tent before tiptoeing around the back of the tent. Voices murmured inside, the girl's high and clear in contrast to the smoky tones of the fortune-teller.

Heart in her mouth, Celine took her supplies out of the satchel she carried. A pile of damp rags she had borrowed from the kitchen garden back at the inn, her flint and tinder. Sparking her flint, she lit the rags, their dampness creating a cloud of thick, choking smoke. Hoping she wouldn't cause too much damage, she set the rags behind the tent, lifting the side wall a few inches to draw the smoke inside.

That should do it. Celine slid around to the side of the tent, crouching to wait. Moments later, her efforts were rewarded.

“Fire.” A voice shouted. “The fortune-teller’s tent is on fire.” Celine forced herself to stand still as the girl and the fortune teller emerged, coughing and spluttering from the doorway. Knowing she had mere seconds to act, Celine lifted the side of the tent and wriggled through. Blinking against the stinging smoke, she peered through the gloom, searching for storage.

After turning over several of the colourful cushions, and rummaging through a chest of drawers, Celine’s eyes settled on the small table with the crystal ball, a round globe underneath its black velvet covering. Of course, she lifted the tablecloth. It wasn’t a table at all. Underneath was a wooden trunk, exquisitely carved with finely crafted brass fittings. Fingers shaking, Celine snatched off the tablecloth, sending the crystal ball tumbling to the ground, and opened the trunk, rifling through the contents. Heavy bags of coins, a small pouch with a green stone necklace, a silver backed mirror, its handle worn with use. She lifted an ancient book, the writing on the cover faded with age. And there it was. Underneath the book was the collar, gleaming up at her.

Celine’s heart pounded with excitement as she lifted the collar and stuffed it into her satchel. Then, eyes watering from the smoke, she turned to go, being careful to keep her sword out of the way as she squirmed back under the side of the tent.

“Not so fast.” A rough hand grabbed the back of Celine’s cloak, stopping her short with a cry of surprise. “You’re not going to get away with this.” It was Karl, with Gerta standing behind him.

Celine struggled and kicked, fighting to slip out of the cloak, but Karl held tight. He wrapped his other arm around her torso before she could reach her sword. “Gerta.” He nodded toward the dark-eyed woman who took the sword out of its sheath.

“I think you might have something of mine.” Karl’s hot sour breath washed over her and she cringed against his iron grip.

“You must be mistaken. I don’t have anything of yours.” Celine protested, still breathing hard from her effort.

“You won’t mind if we just take a look then.” He smirked. Celine’s shoulders sagged. There would be no chance to escape if Karl found the stolen collar.

Gerta took the satchel from Celine’s neck, rooting through it and pulling out the collar, the strange symbols on it glinting in the light. The look on

Gerta's face was almost apologetic as she handed the collar over to Karl, who slid it into the deep pocket of his jacket.

Karl's grip around Celine tightened until she could hardly breathe. "I don't think you exactly know what you've done, sweetheart. That collar was the only thing keeping that—*thing* from wreaking havoc."

"You mean Cherry?"

"Oh, is that what she's calling herself now?" Karl sneered, in one swift motion he twisted Celine's arm behind her back; steering her towards the fortune-teller's tent. The smoke had cleared thanks to a bucket of water poured over it by one of the carnival workers. Only a wet pile of charred rags and a lingering odour remained to show what had happened there.

"Wait. What are you going to do with me?" Celine dragged her feet, trying to slow their progress.

"You know what the penalty for thieves is." Karl yanked her through the opening of the tent, wrenching her arm until she cried out in pain.

"No, you can't do that." Celine's voice pitched high with fear. The last thing she needed was to be forced back to the castle for a trial. "Please, just let me go. I have money, I'll pay you whatever you want—for damages."

Karl laughed, a hoarse bark. "We weren't going to have a trial. Too much hassle. We'll just take care of this ourselves; the old-fashioned way."

"The old-fashioned way? What do you mean the old-fashioned way?" Celine trembled.

Karl ignored her. "Gerta?" He nodded toward the fortune-teller who drew Celine's hood back and took her hat from her head, revealing jagged tufts of hair. "I see she got to you." Karl gave Celine a little shove, and she half sat, half fell onto the hard ground. Grabbing a piece of cord, he securely tied her hands and legs together with a series of thick knots.

"Now, here's what we'll do." Karl sat back on his heels. "You are going to get her back for us. And then I'll help you fix this little problem." He flicked her shorn head. "And, on top of that, I'm going to need a few favours thrown in. After all, I'm the only one here right now who knows who you are." He flashed a toothy grin.

"But I can't get to her," Celine protested. "That's why I needed the collar. I can't go back to the castle without it, unless I want to end up in the dungeon." She twisted her wrists against biting cord wrapped around them.

"Hmm..." Karl scratched his chin. "She's getting better at this. I have to admit she's smarter than I thought she was. Well, I'm afraid you're stuck.

Guess we'll have the trial." He sat on a tasselled cushion and leaned back, crossing his legs in front of him.

"Are you sure there's nothing else I can do for you?" Celine threw Gerta a pleading look, knowing that she would be easier to convince than Karl.

"What is it you think you can do for us." Karl scoffed before Gerta could answer. "I mean, your family walks around like they're some kind of saviours to the mages, but lifting the ban on magic did nothing to help anyone. People don't change their opinions overnight. You think you can undo hundreds of years of damage with just one tiny policy change?"

"Wait, you have magic too?" Temporarily distracted, Celine wondered what kind of magic Karl might have running through his veins.

Karl remained silent, ignoring Celine's question.

"You could start by offering protection to those who have magic. Restitution if there are crimes committed against them," Gerta spoke up, her raspy voice low.

"But surely that's in place already." Celine's voice was shocked. "I mean, according to the law, and the guild, you have every right that any other citizen has."

Karl sneered. "Any citizens? Ha! Are all your citizens chased from pillar to post; sneered at in every town. They might come to see the performance, even give us a coin or two—but they would never let us in. Do you think people *like* living like this?" he waved his hand at the shabby canvas walls of the tent. He glared at Celine.

Celine stared at the floor, discomfort forgotten. She had an inkling of course that things weren't well with the mage community. She remembered the unforgiving, judgemental comments of the woman, Joan, at the inn. But Celine hadn't realized things were this bad.

Karl stood, smoothing the frayed edges of his velvet jacket. "Well, that's enough talk about politics for one day. You keep the little princess in here. I've got to get back out there and make sure everyone's behaving." Without another glance at Celine, Karl stalked away, the tent flap swishing into place behind him.

Celine watched Karl's shadow disappear around the side of the tent. She sneaked a glance at Gerta, who sat still as a stone at her small table, hands folded in front of her.

"Why did you want me to free her if she was going to cause so much trouble?" Celine asked. "I don't understand why you gave me the key."

“The story is just beginning.” Gerta’s deep voice was calm.

Celine waited for her to continue. “Story? Is it part of your gift to know people’s stories? How you know who I am and what I was doing?” Celine asked after a long pause when Gerta remained silent.

“Yes, and your choices are going to make our story. You made your choices and Cherry made hers.” Celine bit her lip, thinking about the cryptic words as Gerta tidied the mess Celine had made of the tent, replacing the crystal ball on the trunk and covering it with the velvet cloth. Reaching into the pocket of her patchwork skirt, Gerta pulled out a small bone-handled knife.

Celine tensed, eyeing the glinting metal blade nervously. Gerta moved toward Celine, kneeling beside her as she pressed herself back against the floor.

“You chose kindness, so kindness will be returned to you. Besides, we need your help.” Gerta cut through the cords around Celine’s wrists. Celine stretched her fingers, embracing the sharp nip of blood flowing into her veins.

“Now, hurry, he’ll be back soon.” Gerta made a shooing motion with her hands.

Celine paused at the opening of the tent. “But what about you? Won’t Karl be angry when he knows you let me go?” A worried expression flashed through her eyes.

“Let me worry about Karl. Just remember us when you’re free, come back for us; they deserve better.” Gerta gestured toward the other tents as she pierced Celine with her dark, knowing eyes. “He’s got the others under his thumb as well, and you must be careful, he’s more dangerous than you can imagine. Karl is a collector.”

Celine raised questioning eyes to Gerta’s. Collector wasn’t a term she was familiar with. “He collects talent. Find people who have abilities and uses them to make money. Travels around from place to place looking. He’s always looking for more. And when they’re not useful anymore, he sells them to the highest bidder.” Gerta spit the words out with disgust.

Celine reeled. “But *how*. Doesn’t the mage guild protect them?”

“The guild.” Gerta’s voice grew hard. “Most people can’t afford guild fees. And even if they could, the guild is so green, they’re not established enough to do much of anything at all. The guild needs help—we need help.”

“Well what can I do? I’m running myself.” Celine gestured toward her outfit, streaked with dirt and reeking of smoke.

“Karl leaves the valuables—the money—in the tent with me, but he controls us with a medallion he keeps on his person. Find a way to steal it from him, then bring the medallion to me. And to hurry. Karl is only here to make another collection, then he’s heading back to Corvan, there’s a something big happening there soon. He hasn’t mentioned it, but I see it coming. We have to escape before then or many people are going to be sold. Now go, I’ll keep watch for you; you have a few minutes to get away.”

With one last glance at the mysterious woman, Celine was away.

Celine scurried out of the tent, slinking through the crowd. *Now how am I going to get that medallion from Karl*, she thought, frustration building as she stopped behind a display of carved wooden furniture. She paused, pretending to examine a chest of drawers. “Can I help you?” The vendor, a wiry man with a shock of spiky red hair, hovered nearby. He eyeballed the fine cloth of Celine’s cloak, hoping for a sale.

“Just browsing.” Celine ran a finger along the smooth wood, combing the area for a glimpse of Karl’s distinctive green jacket.

“We have that in mahogany as well,” the man suggested, as Celine lingered, wondering how much longer she could keep the merchant at bay. Her eyes scanned the marketplace. There, only two stalls away, she spotted Karl, speaking to one of the acrobats. Quickly, she knelt down, pretending to examine a drawer and trying to keep out of sight, but she was too late. Karl was staring straight at her.

“Thief!” Karl roared as he pointed a finger at Celine. The blood drained from Celine’s face. She turned to the furniture vender, who was staring at her in shock.

Celine couldn’t get caught again, it would be a disaster. Whirling, she scrambled away, knocking over a rack and scattering a stack of wooden trays in her panic. Recovering quickly from his surprise, the vender reached out his arm to grab her but desperation gave her speed and she ducked under it just in time, rolling to the ground before springing back up to her feet again. With Karl in hot pursuit, she sprinted away, arms pumping as she pelted through the square, shoving people out of the way in her haste. Weaving her way through the stalls, she dashed back into the fabric merchant’s stall, squatting down behind the bolts of dyed canvas. Spotting

an opening at the back of the stall, she slipped out, tagging along with a group of farmers heading toward the inn.

When Celine arrived at the inn, she found the innkeeper who agreed to give her a recently vacated room. Sinking onto her the narrow bed, Celine planned her next move. Finding the medallion and moving a large group of people would be no easy feat.

But Celine couldn't leave the carnival trainers. Not with Karl. Celine took out her satchel, finding some clean clothes and changing her heavy woolen cloak for a light one. It would do for now to disguise her. At least long enough to let her retrieve Winston.

She searched through her bag, looking for something—anything—she could use to help, pausing when her hand settled on a familiar leather case. Something given to all guards as part of their standard equipment. Practical Lucie must have included it, Celine thought gratefully as her fingers fumbled with the leather ties. The case opened to reveal a stash of medical supplies, a neat roll of bandages, a few implements and a collection of glass bottles and vials, their contents neatly labelled with bits of paper. She found the one she was looking for and put it in her pocket, hoping it would be enough to accomplish her goal.

Before leaving Celine examined herself in the tiny mirror that hung on the wall. She took off her hat, turning her head back and forth, examining her shorn head. A pang of anger and regret shooting through her as she remembered the golden waves of hair she used to take for granted. Narrowing her eyes, she leaned closer. Was it... getting longer? She took a piece between two fingers. She was certain it was at least an inch or even two inches longer than when it was first cut. Running her fingers through it, she gave it a thoughtful tug. She opened the curtains, then returned to the mirror, tilting her face. The blotches had faded, bringing her skin back to its former porcelain smoothness, and her eyelashes seemed to grow back as well.

Spirits bolstered by her new discovery, Celine covered herself with her cloak and went back to Market Square, forcing herself to dawdle. Her sword hung at her side and this time, as an extra precaution, she had tucked a dagger in her boot, its solid length providing her with an extra sense of security. Eye's alert, she headed for the railing where she had left Winston.

"Would you like to earn even more coins?" she asked the ragged boy as she untied the horse. His eyes lit up, giving her the answer she was hoping

for.

“There’s a man in a green velvet jacket. He’s with the performers, their leader. I want you to follow him. Do you think you can do it without letting him see you? I’ll give you one silver now, and another when you come back. You can find me tonight at the Illes Cross Inn and tell me everything you saw.” She handed him a coin, which he quickly snatched from her hand and pushed into his pocket with a cheeky grin.

“All right, miss.” He said, scampering off.

Celine took Winston and put him in the stable, giving him an extra ration of oats to thank him for his patience. She left him nose down munching happily and went to her room to wait.

Opting to have food sent to her room, Celine was lying on the bed, feet propped up on a cushion, when there was a rap at the door.

“I did what you asked miss.” The boy came in, peering around at the simple room with curious eyes. “Say, is that a dagger?” He touched the weapon on the bed beside Celine with reverence. “I’ve never seen one up close before.”

“You haven’t?” Celine sat up, surprised, when growing up at the castle weapons had been a part of everyday life.

“No, miss. My family is—was farmers. Except my cousin. He went away to be a soldier.” A note of pride crept into the boy’s voice and his green eyes shone, lighting up his thin face.

“And what does your family do now?”

The light left the boy’s eyes, his face drooped. “They got the fever, so they couldn’t keep the farm anymore—it’s just me now.”

Celine’s heart broke for the boy, and the words spilled out her mouth before she could take them back. “I need a stable boy, do you want to come work for me?”

“Really, miss?”

“Of course.” Celine’s voice held a confidence she didn’t feel. A tagalong boy was hardly going to be an asset. But she couldn’t leave him on his own either. “I’m not going home right away though, but you can come with me. I’ll let you take care of Winston.”

“He’s a lovely horse, so he is.” Admiration coloured the boy’s voice.

“Right, so that’s settled.” Celine stood up, brushing off her hands while secretly wondering what she was going to do with this adorable waif while

completing her mission. “Now, if you’re going to work for me, I need to know what your name is.”

“You can call me Tommy.” The boy’s voice was cheerful.

“Well, Tommy, we have another job to do.”

Tommy had done a surprisingly good job of following Karl, his small stature letting him blend in with the crowd and remain unseen.

Unfortunately for Celine, however, Karl was a man of few vices. When he wasn’t organizing the members of the carnival, he preferred to keep to himself. Never once had Tommy seen him set foot in a tavern.

“If we could just get to his food or drink, everything will be good.” Celine moaned, flopping back on the lumpy pillow.

“Oh, I can do that.” Tommy spoke confidently.

“You can? How?” Celine sat up, her face brightening.

“He likes the mead at one of the stalls. The one nearest the fountain.”

“Do you think you could slip something in his drink?”

“Probably.” Tommy fingered the material of his new breeches. Celine had sent a few coins with him when he went to the market to replace the rags he was wearing. “If I wear my old clothes, no one even notices me. I just blend in with the others.” He referred to the group of ragged children that gathered at the market every morning. “If I give them a few coins I could get some of them to distract him for me.”

“That would be perfect.” Celine’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “Do you think he’ll go there tonight?”

Celine slipped down the back stairs of the Illes Cross, cringing as a loose floorboard creaked under her foot. Luckily, there was so much coming and going in the inn that the sound didn’t even register and she slipped out the back door unnoticed. Tommy had returned thirty minutes earlier, revealing to her that after a long wait, Karl had stopped by the stall for a tankard of mead; and just as Tommy had promised, his friends had distracted Karl just long enough for Tommy to slip the potion in his drink.

“I hope it works.” Celine joined Tommy near the cluster of tents as agreed beforehand. “I only have the one dose, and I don’t think the apothecary is open anymore.” Despite the late hour, the market was still bustling. Celine watched as Karl’s acrobats somersaulted to a cheering crowd across the ground near the fountain. Safe under the cover of darkness, Celine felt confident the noise of the market was enough to cover noise she and Tommy might make. Approaching the tents, they began

searching for Karl. He was in the third tent, stretched out on a small cot with his mouth hanging open as he snored loudly. Celine gestured with her finger for Tommy to come.

“You stand guard, I’ll go in and get what I need,” she whispered. “If someone comes, shout.”

She tiptoed inside, wrinkling her nose against the stench of stale sweat. When Karl murmured in his sleep, his leg jerking, Celine’s heart nearly stopped in her mouth, but he rolled over and settled back to sleep.

Inching forward, she moved the front of his shirt back with a finger and saw it. A heavy gold medallion gleaming against the rough skin. She touched it, recoiling at the ominous feeling emitting from the dull metal. Sliding her finger under the medallion, she eased it up, searching for a clasp. After some manoeuvring, she slid it around and with trembling fingers opened the clasp, gathering the medallion into her hands. An unpleasant buzzing sensation surged through her hand and up her arm when she touched the object. Magic, she recognized the feeling from the few magical objects King Erich and Queen Isabella had recovered when they lifted the ban. She wrapped the medallion in a scrap of cloth and buried it in the bottom of her satchel before she turned to the unpleasant job of searching his pockets for the collar. Only lint and a few small coins. He must have put the collar somewhere, but where? Her eyes roamed the interior of the tent. Aside from some clothes and a few cooking utensils, it contained very little. She rifled through the scattered belongings, desperate fingers quivering with nerves.

“Hurry,” Tommy hissed, interrupting her frantic search. “Someone’s coming.” Celine’s heart plunged as she turned to leave.

“Did you get it?” Tommy’s eyes gleamed with excitement as she opened her satchel to reveal the medallion. “That must be worth some money, miss.” He breathed in awe, looking closely at the strange inscription running around the outside of the flat round object.

“I found the medallion, but I didn’t find the collar; and that’s what I really need. Maybe Gerta knows where he keeps it.” Celine knew she had mere minutes to act as she dashed toward the fortune-teller’s tent. “She’ll know what to do with this too.” She shuddered, even in her satchel, she could feel the strange power of the medallion radiating.

Celine burst into Gerta’s tent, interrupting her session with a portly woman hiding under a large purple scarf. The woman whipped her head

around, alarmed at Celine's sudden entrance, then relaxed, realizing it was a stranger.

"Excuse me," Celine murmured, ducking her head to go back outside.

"No, that's quite all right, my dear. We were just finished here." Gerta gave the woman a kind smile, watching as she wrapped the scarf around her head, presumably so no one would recognize her.

"Many people still don't approve of us here," Gerta explained as she straightened the velvet cloth covering her trunk. "I take it you were successful?"

"I found the medallion. But I couldn't find the collar anywhere." Celine's troubled eyes met Gerta's deep brown pools.

"He must have the collar hidden." Gerta was unruffled. "All in its own time."

Celine clenched her teeth, but remained silent. She didn't *have* time. "What should I do with this?" she asked the other woman, shifting her feet in the scatter of grit and sand that still covered the floor of the tent.

"Bring it here." Gerta took a pair of tongs and put a few lumps of charcoal into her copper brazier. They flared, casting a red glow across her face.

Celine took the medallion out of her satchel, being careful not to touch it. The symbols scrolling around the outer edge of the medallion seemed to shift and move in the crimson light. She held it out.

Wrapping her hand in a cloth, Gerta took the medallion, muttering a few words under her breath as she dropped it on the hot coals. Billows of thick choking smoke rolled out of the brazier, filling the tent with an acrid bitter smell. Celine coughed, eyes watering. Gerta waiting, keeping a watchful eye on the fire, and when the smoke cleared, Celine felt as if a weight had lifted off her chest. Her thoughts were suddenly clearer.

"Was that it?" She lifted her eyes to Gerta's.

"That was it." Gerta waved away a few lingering tendrils of smoke. "Now, they should have felt that too, but we may need to explain it to them. And we'll have to get away from Karl; I can guarantee that's not the only trick he has up his sleeves. How much time do you think we have until he wakes up?"

"Maybe a few hours?"

"That will have to do. If we can make it to the Iasian border before he catches up to us, King Ruben and Queen Abigail's men will protect us."

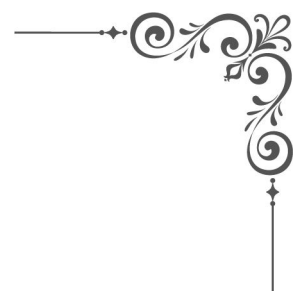
“But what about the collar?” Celine’s voice was anxious. I have to get it back.”

“If it’s not on his person, I don’t know where it is. But we can look for it when we pack up. We’re used to moving around a lot, so we should be ready to leave in an hour. Meet us back here then.”

Dismissed, Celine found herself standing outside the tent, bewildered at the speed with which Gerta had taken control.

“What happened?” Tommy’s eager face popped around the corner of the tent.

“Let’s get Winston. We’re going to Iasia.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

There were thirty-three of them. Celine counted. Twice. Thirty-five if she counted herself and Tommy. Thirty-three people she was now responsible for. The rag-tag group comprising the acrobat troupe, a trick magician and his assistant—who turned out to be his daughter—Gerta, and a collection of others. All had some sort of magical skill or ability.

“Are you all ready?” Market Square was abandoned, empty stalls and bits of litter lay scattered across the flagstones. Karl’s tent stood at the end of the square, a lone triangle surrounded by bare ground.

Gerta presided at the front of the group, perched on a white mule with a belled harness. Her bracelets jingled as she lifted her arm, signalling for them to begin the journey.

Celine and Gerta led the group down the main street, the creaking harnesses and clopping hooves causing more than a few noses to press up against their windows as they passed. Tommy, who had opted not to ride in the wagon; sat proudly in front of Celine, reaching down occasionally to stroke Winston’s coat.

It was slow going. Several of the younger ones were flagging after a long day of work. When Celine saw more than a few pairs of drooping eyes, she let Winston drift to the rear of the party.

“Do you think they can keep up the pace?” Celine asked Brainard in a low voice. Ager Gerta, Brainard seemed to be the leader of the group. Older than the rest, he was a burly man with wiry brown hair sticking out from under his cap. He was accompanied by his daughter Miranda, a quiet girl who remained glued to his side, barely speaking a word.

“We need to go a little farther to make sure Karl can’t catch up with us. Do you think can do it?” Celine lowered her voice. Most of the group were young and, although willing, seemed bewildered by the unexpected turn of events. “I want to cross the border by morning, I don’t what else Karl is capable of.”

“Aye.” Brainard nodded in agreement. “I think Karl’s promised a few of the performers to specific buyers, and his buyers aren’t the type you want to offend if you catch my drift.” He shifted wary eyes to Miranda, who gave him a wan smile before lowering her eyes. “I overheard him talking to one

of his messengers. Karl could be a bit careless at times; we knew more than thinks we do. See Miranda here, she's a sizer; and I know that's in demand among the thieves." He gave his daughter a protective look.

"A sizer?" Celine gave Brainard a questioning look.

"She can change her size. Handy if you want to lift a bit of jewellery. Rare too." A note of pride entered Brainard's voice.

Celine pressed her lips together, trying not to think about what the intentions of the other buyers might be.

"And how did no one notice Karl was doing this?" Celine had wondered this for a while. "Why *can't* the guild protect the mage interests?"

"The guild?" Brainard chuckled. "Karl is in the guild. If it were his word against ours, he would come out on top."

Celine drew her lip into her teeth, worrying it as she thought for a moment. "What about the king's guards then? Couldn't they have helped you? I know King Erich would never allow this had he known about it."

"The medallion put a silencing ward on us. Some tried, but the words came out gibberish. The only one who knew their way around Karl was Gerta." Brainard cast an admiring glance toward head of the line where Gerta swayed on her mule.

"Where would Karl even get something that powerful anyway?" Celine shuddered as mind drifted back to the thick oily aura seeping from the medallion.

"One of his friends made the medallion and warded it for him. That medallion cost Karl a pretty penny, I'd say. Magic like that don't come cheap. He's going to be out for blood when he finds it missing."

"Do you know where Karl might have got the collar? You know the one that Cherry was wearing? Was it from the same friend?"

"Probably." Brainard clucked at his horse. "He never let us see who it was; but from what I do know, it was someone powerful—influential. But when we get to Iasia, that won't matter as much. King Ruben and Queen Abigail have no tolerance for these shenanigans, and they have a strong guild that can deal with the likes of Karl."

Celine realized at the pace they were travelling, they were at least an hour's ride from the border. The sky was lightening from black to grey and a line of pink peeked through the trees on the eastern horizon.

"We'll still have to get to King Ruben's men, even after we cross the border. After we reach Iasia, we can leave the main road and find a quiet

place to camp so everyone can rest.” Celine noticed Miranda’s head nodding. And she wasn’t the only one; the group was exhausted and wouldn’t be able to keep going much longer.

Finally, they reached the Iasian border. Here instead of thick forest, the trees were spaced out with large rocks, granite—Celine thought, recognizing a large boulder protruding into their path. This area was known for sheep, Celine spotted a few grey shapes huddled together as they slept. Presently they came to a path—nothing more than a track, really. But it led off the main road, offering safety. “This way.” Celine guided Winston to the front of the group, leading the way down the path. The three wagons creaked, rocking over the rough ground as the sturdy mules pulled them steadily over the rutted trail.

Celine leaned in to whisper to Gerta. “They can’t go too much farther without a rest; we can stop here and regroup.”

Gerta nodded, the fine lines around her eyes showing her fatigue. “I think there’s a lake up ahead, it’s near a hunting lodge; but that’s rarely used. I camped here often when I was a child.”

Sure enough, around the bend, a lake appeared, the surface glittering in the rising sun.

“We’ll stop here.” Celine turned to the group, speaking in her most commanding voice. They turned off the road and headed for a stand of beech. An opening in the trees gave them access to a pebbly beach covered in small granite stones. The group lost no time pitching their tents and soon had set up a tidy campsite complete with a blazing fire.

“Have some porridge.” Fiona, an acrobat, pushed back her mane of fiery red curls as she ladled Celine a steaming bowl of porridge. She sprinkled a crumbling layer of brown sugar on top. “There’s one for Tommy as well.”

Celine took the bowl gratefully, settling on a flat rock and breathing in the sugary scented steam rising from the bowl. Fiona settled next to her, tipping her face up to the sunshine.

“We can’t thank you enough for what you did.” Fiona blew on a spoonful of porridge before putting it into her mouth.

“Well, I couldn’t live with myself if I had left you there.” Celine kicked a pile of damp leaves with her boot. “How did you come to be with him, anyway?”

“My mother and father passed away in the riots,” Fiona answered. “The people in town forced me out of my home and didn’t have anywhere to go. Karl offered shelter. He seemed kind—at first—and I didn’t think I had any other options. Well, not ones I wanted to consider.” Her long lashes fanned her cheek. “When I told Karl I was a dancer, he put me with the acrobats. It wasn’t all bad, I had the other acrobats. We were all in it together. It’s when people started disappearing. We all knew Karl was behind it. And then he showed us the medallion. If any of us touched it, we would die.”

“I still don’t understand how he gets away with it.” Celine scooted over on her rock when Alanna, Fiona’s acrobatic partner, came to join them.

“He keeps quiet, moves around a lot, and uses coin when nothing else works.” Allana pitched into the conversation as she settled herself, twisting her flexible legs and tucking them underneath her.

“And the medallion, how did that work?”

“With this.” Fiona set down her bowl. Drawing up her sleeve she held out her arm to Celine, revealing a tiny tattoo etched in the pale delicate skin of her inner elbow. Celine peered down, squinting at the strange script running across the pale skin of her arm. The text matched the script carved into the edge of the medallion.

“Karl did this to you?” Gently, Celine took Fiona’s arm. “How does it work?”

“Magic,” Fiona replied. “Dark magic. It’s not his, but he has access; Karl has some very powerful friends.” Fiona repeated what Brainard had told Celine earlier.

“Well, when I get back home, there will be no more of this.” Celine set her chin stubbornly.

“When you get back?” Alanna questioned.

“Back to the castle. I only came to find Karl to get Cherry’s collar back. I don’t actually look like this.” Celine gestured to her face and hair, which had grown another inch overnight.

“Cherry did *that* to you?” Fiona’s eyes widened. “She was always so shy and quiet, I didn’t think she would be capable of that.”

“Well, she’s not shy anymore.” Celine scraped the last of her porridge from the bottom of the bowl. “But I intend to take my rightful place back, and when I do, I’m going to track down Karl and every single one of his friends.” Her expression was steel.

Leaving Fiona and Allana by the fire, Celine took her bowl and spoon to the lake to wash them. It was while scrubbing them with a handful of clean sand and rinsing it in the icy clear water that Celine heard a shuffling noise behind her.

“Do you want me to wash yours too—oh!” Turning around, she realized in shock she wasn’t talking to one of the performers, but a huge shaggy bear. The bear stood on his back feet, sniffing the air before dropping back down and lumbering straight for Celine. Dropping her bowl in the lake, she reached for her sword. Sliding it out of the scabbard, she swung it up, nicking the bear in the shoulder and ducking under the giant paw that swiped through the air. Rolling away, she sprung up on her feet as the bear roared in frustration, beady eyes glittering in anger and pain. Again, the heavy paw swept down, catching the corner of her cloak. Celine stumbled back, tripping over one of the sharp rocks that littered the beach.

“Go away!” Celine shouted, voice hoarse with desperation.

But it was too late for that; the bear was furious, throwing its head back in another mighty roar. Knowing this was her only chance, Celine thrust herself forward, burying her sword in the bear’s chest. In one swift move, she pulled it back out with a nightmarish sucking sound. The bear grunted, dropping to all fours, but continued to press towards her, rearing forward on clumsy feet.

Celine shouted again. Members of the carnival ran to the lake, but unarmed, they were helpless to do anything but watch. Tommy, however, undeterred by his lack of weapons, grabbed a long branch. Shouting loudly, he waved it at the bear. The large animal swung its head around, focusing cold marble eyes on the small boy.

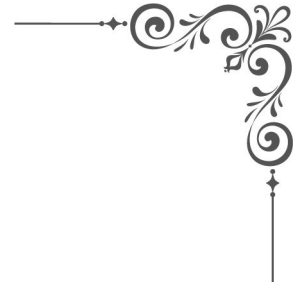
“No, Tommy!” shouted Celine. Desperately, she swung again, this time catching the bear in the neck as he turned toward Tommy. “Get back.” The bear reeled at the blow but continued to lurch toward Tommy, snorting through blood and pain.

Gritting her teeth, Celine lunged forward again, burying the sword to the hilt in the bear’s chest. With a thud, the bear fell to the ground, a tremor shivered the leaves in the nearby trees; then all was still.

With a sob, Celine drew out her sword and dropped it to the ground, reaching for the small boy. “You idiot.” She wiped a tear from her cheek. “What were you thinking, going after a bear with a stick like that?” She

wrapped him in her arms, and he squeaked in surprise. “Never do that again.”

“I couldn’t let him get you,” Tommy argued, squirming from her tight embrace. “Not after all you’ve done for me.” Despite his protest, Celine gave him another tight squeeze before picking up her sword, rinsing it in the lake and wiping it carefully on the edge of her cloak. Rising to her feet, she saw the members of the carnival had silently gathered around her. Wordlessly, Gerta stepped forward and put her arm around Celine, leading her back to the campsite.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Celine sat on a log by the lake watching Tommy. He had fashioned a fishing pole from a piece of wire and a stick and was busy flinging it into the water.

"I'll catch us a fish for dinner." He grinned over his shoulder at Celine as he flung the wire again, nearly losing his bait in the process.

Celine smiled at the boy before turning back to Gerta and Brainard. The three of them had become the unofficial leaders of the group and were in the midst of discussing their next move.

"Everyone's tired." Brainard combed his fingers through his beard. "And we're far enough off the path that we should be safe for the time being. What do you think, Gerta?"

Gerta closed her eyes, her face still in concentration. "I don't sense any immediate danger. But that doesn't mean things can't change." She sighed. "I'd feel better if we were in safe hands, of course. But I think you're right. They need to rest." Her skirt flapped in the breeze as she stretched her legs out on the rock.

Celine nodded in agreement, eyes on the flickering water. Anxious as she was to restore her appearance and regain her rightful place, she knew she had to get the group to safety first.

"I got one." Jumping up and down in excitement, Tommy held up his line, a silver fish wriggling at the end.

"Well done." Celine waved at him.

"I'm going to catch another." Grinning, Tommy put his fish safely in a bucket he'd wrangled from the one of the performers and baited his hook again, tossing the line back into the lake.

Leaving Gerta and Brainard to their discussion, Celine wandered along the edge of the lake, skirting the area where she had killed the bear. Arlo and Cathal, two burly twins, had taken on the onerous task of skinning the bear, taking the meat and setting it aside for roasting over the fire. As she passed, she could see them parcelling out the portions and tossing the entrails to the dogs, who were wolfing up the scraps.

Sticking to the shore, Celine picked her way through a marshy patch, the thick sticky mud sucking at her boots. The terrain here was so different

from what she was used to in Lovan. The steep hills covered with scrubby grass and hardy trees instead of the lush woods and rich farmland she was used to seeing. She climbed over a boulder, the rough surface of the granite biting into her hands. The campsite had long disappeared around the corner of the shore, and she relished the quiet solace only interrupted by lapping waves and twittering birds. A flash of red caught Celine's eye, a patch of wild raspberries. She plucked a juicy raspberry and ate it, letting the sweet and tart flavours mingle on her tongue.

The performers would love these tonight. Celine wished she had something to carry the raspberries in. Rummaging in her pocket, she drew out her kerchief. That would have to do. Spreading it out on the rock, she filled it with the plump juicy berries then lifted it gingerly by the corners, being careful not to bruise them.

A rustling sound behind Celine caught her attention. Still nervous after her encounter with the bear, she spun, eyes scanning the trees for danger. But she was met with stillness and silence. Too much silence, she realized. Even the wind had died down, leaving everything abnormally still. Checking behind her, Celine quickened her pace; a strange prickling sensation at the back of her neck warning her something was amiss.

A crashing through the trees broke the unnatural silence. Celine ran, dropping the kerchief. The berries rolled the ground, leaving splotches of red. Breathing hard, Celine scrambled over the sharp rocks. Whatever or whoever was behind her was catching up quickly. When she reached a smooth section on the trail, she risked glancing behind her.

Fear gripped her heart. It was Karl, face twisted in a snarl as his legs covered the ground at an unnatural speed. Even though Celine was quick, Karl gained on her as if she were standing in place. Still running, she reached for her sword, clasping her hand around the cold metal.

She spun, ready to take the offensive when Celine's arm froze. Karl was pointing his finger at her as he moved, arm outstretched, eyes focused on her as he chanted.

Celine struggled with all her might, but he had trapped her arm as if in a vice—she couldn't even twitch a finger.

This is it.

Celine thought, eyes frozen open.

Just then Karl tripped over a loose rock, letting his concentration waver. Celine's arm shot forward, propelled by the force she had been putting into

it. Using all her skills, she balanced, just getting in a clumsy strike on his torso. A shock travelled up her arm, stinging like a swarm of bees. Her eyes watering from the pain, Celine struck again, this time aiming for the hand that still pointed at her. Again, came the stinging sensation, this time stronger. But Celine attack was effective. Through the tears blurring her eyes, she saw Karl falter; thrown back by the force. Frantically, she threw herself forward, pushing through the pain; but she was too late.

Karl had gathered himself, even as he staggered back. His eyes glittering with anger, he raised his hand again, the force clashing against her sword. A bolt of energy shot through her, agonizing pain making her vision fuzzy around the edges. This was stronger than anything Celine had fought before. Gripping the sword in both hands, she raised it above her head; then, knowing he would send his power to her sword, she flung her leg up toward his chest. Arms pinwheeling, Karl fell to the ground, but not before he sent another flash of blue light spinning toward her. Celine ducked and turned, zigzagging her way across the rocky terrain as she sprinted toward the trees.

Energy flagging, Celine faltered toward the thickest of them, knowing she had mere seconds before Karl recovered. She didn't dare to look back to see if he was closing in on her. Her heart pounded, her breath was rasping in her chest, drowning out the sounds of the forest as she pushed her way through a thick patch of underbrush, a spiky branch drawing a long bloody scratch on her cheek. Up ahead she spotted a narrow ravine. If she could just make it to the ravine, she could creep along the bottom and make her way toward safer ground. Celine slid to the bottom of the ravine, sharp rocks scraping her as she crashed and rolled to the bottom. Another bolt of light flashed above her head and everything went black.



CELINE BLINKED, MILKY strands of fog and pain clouded her vision.

“Oh, you’re up.” An overly cheerful voice roared through her head like a hammer.

“Where am I?” Celine struggled to sit, the fog gradually clearing to reveal her surroundings. She put a hand to her aching head. She was lying on a large, padded seat, covered with furs, she realized, clutching the soft strands with her free hand.

“You’re in my hunting lodge.” A figure came into view, tall, with wide shoulders and dark hair.

“I am?” Celine rubbed at her head, wincing at the fierce pain that pounded behind her temple. “How did I get here?”

“I brought you here.” The figure drew a little closer, and Celine focused on the face that hovered over her. There was something vaguely familiar about it. Her eyes wandered around the room, and she wondered how she arrived in a hunting lodge.

“I found you on our land; you were lying at the bottom of the ravine. Do you have any idea how you got there?” The man’s voice deep voice soothed her with its rhythmic cadence.

Celine strained her memory, trying to clear her thoughts, but they remained elusive, hovering just out of reach.

“Never mind, it’s clear you’ve been through quite a time. Here, drink this, it will help you feel better.” He handed her a steaming mug, which she took it cautiously in both hands. It smelled sweet, like apples and cinnamon. Celine took a tiny sip, letting the tartness clear the fog.

He stood patiently, waiting until Celine finished the last dregs. She looked around, her head a little clearer. *Whoever this lodge belongs to is clearly part of the nobility*, Celine thought, taking in the finely crafted furnishings. Paintings hung on the wood-beamed walls, and soft warm rugs covered the floorboards.

“Feeling better?” His smile was genuine and kind.

“Yes, thank you. I’m so sorry to impose on you like this.” Celine was suddenly aware of her grubby state.

“Nothing to worry about, I don’t have many guests here, but the ones I do are most welcome. You can call me Alex.”

“Well, Alex, thank you for your hospitality. I really have to be going though.” Celine knew... somehow.... that she had to be somewhere urgently, she just didn’t know where. She attempted to stand, but, overwhelmed by sudden dizziness, she fell back to the bench.

Alex reached out to steady her, his hand warm against her shoulder. “You don’t have to go just yet. Stay a while until you feel better.”

“Thank you.” Celine attempted a watery smile. She lay back down on the furs, watching the fire in the great stone hearth. A spark shot out, sending a flash of recognition shooting through her memory. What had she been running from? She wondered, focusing on the licking flames.

“Someone was chasing me,” Celine murmured, letting the warmth sink into her bones. Her eyes flicked to his, noticing for the first time the long lashes that fringed them. “Someone dangerous—I needed to warn them.” She pressed her hand against her eyes, sorting through her muddled thoughts.

“I didn’t see anyone near you.” Alex rubbed a finger against the golden circle around his finger. “Had they been chasing you long?”

Celine closed her eyes again as she concentrated, distracted by an unfamiliar flutter in her stomach that responded to Alex’s nearness. “I was fighting someone—I had a sword. Did you find it?” She opened her eyes, searching his face for answers.

“I did.” Alex reached under the seat and drew out the sword, its gleaming handle scattering shards of light around the room. He lay the weapon carefully across his knees. “It’s a fine piece.” He ran a finger down the etchings carved into the blade. “Where did you get a sword like this?” His dark eyes met hers, full of curiosity.

Celine lowered her lashes, the more ornate swords were usually reserved for the nobility, “My brother taught me to use a sword,” she answered. “I found out I was good at it, and it gave me an escape; something I could do that was mine.” How she knew this was a mystery to her. She shifted restlessly, feeling the weight of his gaze.

A door opened behind Celine, creating a welcome distraction from uncomfortable questions. “She’s awake.” A woman bustled in, apple shaped cheeks rosy with smiles. “How are you feeling, my dear?” She pressed a warm hand against Celine’s cheek. “I hear you’ve had quite the ordeal, you must be hungry. I’ll bring you something from the kitchen.” She swooped up the mug, using the cloth from her apron to wipe away the ring of moisture left behind.

“Thanks Galia.” Alex shot the woman a warm, grateful look.

Before she knew what was happening, Celine was being seated at the vast wooden table in the warm kitchen, tucking into a plate filled with sausages, eggs, a delicious fried bread, grilled mushrooms and large slices of ham glazed with golden honey.

“How are you feeling now?” Alex cut into his ham.

Celine swallowed a mouthful of eggs, “A lot better. I just wish I could remember what happened.”

“When you’ve recovered a bit more, I can take you back to where I found you, it might jog your memory.” Alex offered, spearing a bit of sausage.

Celine nodded in agreement; the sense of urgency was growing stronger. “Make sure you take Inver with you.” Galia, elbow deep in bread dough, turned around, her apron covered in a fine layer of flour dust. “Whatever... or whoever did that is bound to be dangerous.” She looked pointedly at the large bruise blooming on the side of Celine’s face.

“Inver?” Celine took another bite of the bread. It was delicious, crispy and golden on the outside, and not something she had ever eaten in Lovan.

“Inver’s my knight. My mother sends him here to keep me out of trouble.” Alex shot Celine a wry smile. “And Galia makes sure he does it.”

“Yes, Queen Abigail worries about Alex being here alone. Especially since you are new to the crown.” Galia turned back to her dough, kneading vigorously.

“Oh, you’re *that* Alex.” Understanding dawned in Celine’s eyes as she took in Alex’s appearance. She gripped her fork as a memory rushed back, the castle in Iasia filled with golden candlelight and Alex, stiff and formal taking her hand for that first dance.

Alex twisted his lip. “Don’t worry, I’m still not used to it either, that’s why I come here every chance I get.”

Celine flashed another glance in his direction. Here, he seemed so different, more relaxed, his hair tousled, the sleeves of his tunic rolled up, bare forearms resting on the table.

“Enjoy it while you can.” Galia frowned as she began patting and shaping her dough into ovals. “Your mother and determined to plan that wedding as soon as possible.”

Celine’s gut twisted at the mention of the wedding. She studied Alex’s reaction carefully out of the corner of her eye as he visibly flinched. Clearly he didn’t recognize her, *not that he would*, she thought to herself. *I look nothing like I did, and we barely even met each other in the first place.* Although Celine was trying everything she could to get out of the marriage, a pang of discomfort pricked at her heart when she saw his reaction.

“Do you *want* to get married?” she asked, tracing at the woodgrain pattern of the table.

Alex sighed. “I’m not against it; I mean, I did plan to marry... eventually. But it would have been nice to make my own choice. My

mother can be a bit... pushy. I mean, Celine's a very nice girl, I've only heard good things about her..."

Celine avoided his gaze. If she were to be completely honest with herself, she had given little thought to Alex's feelings on the matter. But he was right about one thing, Queen Abigail had been the element pushing the two of them together.

"Couldn't you just say no?"

Galia laughed, leaving a streak of flour on her cheek when she wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron. "Not to that woman."

Alex nodded. "It is very difficult to say no to my mother when she has her mind set on something. I tried, of course, but she told me it was for the good of the kingdom and she was right; it's hard to say no to that." He pushed his plate back and stood up. "Galia will take you to get your cloak, and then we can go."

Celine studied her face in the mirror. Galia had taken her to a large cheerful guestroom to change out of her soiled clothing. Large windows lining one wall let in sunlight that streamed across the floor, highlighting the wood until it shone gold. Long green curtains hung from the windows, with cushioned chairs on either side of them.

Aside from the large bruise that covered one side of her head, Celine was looking more like her old self than ever. The potion Cherry had given her must be wearing off. She crinkled her brow—trying to follow the thread of the thought before it drifted away. She leaned closer, the cropped hair that was turning into a halo of golden curls that sprung out in every direction.

"Cherry," she gasped the word aloud, as a host of memories came flooding back. Cherry... the collar... Karl. *Karl. I have to stop him before he gets to the others... If he hasn't already.* She glanced out the window. Hours had passed since she had fallen into the ravine.

"Alex." She rushed from the room, banging the door against the wall in her hurry.

"What's wrong, are you all right?" Alex's face filled with concern as Celine came barrelling into the room. He held her by the arms to stop her from crashing into him.

"I have to get back. There's people in danger." Eyes wide with distress, Celine sat on a nearby chair and began shoving her feet into her boots.

“Inver and I will take you.” Alex sprang into action. “I’ll tell Inver to ready the horses. I’m assuming you can ride?”

“I can.” Celine strapped on her sword. “We’ll be going toward the lake. There’s a group of people camped there. At least I hope they’re still there.” Icy tendrils crept down Celine’s spine as she wondered what havoc Karl might have caused her friends.

Celine explained the situation to the best of her ability as she followed Alex to the stable where Inver, a tall giant of a man, was saddling the horses. “Are you sure you’re up to this?” Alex’ voice was uneasy. “Inver and I can go if you give us directions.”

“No, I want to make sure they’re all right.” Celine was already swinging into the saddle.

Following Celine’s directions, Inver led them toward the lake, and in less than thirty minutes they rode into the camp. Tommy recognized Celine first and ran to meet them. “I was so worried about you, miss.” His brown hair flopped in his big brown eyes. “What happened to you?” He eyed the bruise on the side of her head.

“Just a fall.” Celine glossed over her injury. “Where’s Brainard and Gerta? There’s something urgent I need to tell them.”

“Here.” Brainard strode toward her with the ever-present Miranda two steps behind.

“It’s Karl. He knows where we are.”

“He was here already,” Brainard answered. “Luckily we fought him off before he could do too much damage, but I think he’ll be back—probably with reinforcements.”

Celine’s eyes scanned the campsite, noticing a still smouldering tent, a wet patch and a discarded bucket showing where to put a fire out.

“What happened?” Alex asked.

Celine gave an assuring nod to Brainard. “You can trust him.”

“It was while you were out,” Brainard explained as the trio dismounted, letting Tommy lead the horses away. “He waited until we were eating, so we would all be in one place. Then he used his power to overpower us. Once he hit us, there wasn’t much we could do to fight back.”

“Did you know he could do that?” Celine asked.

“No one did, not even Gerta. Luckily for us, he came alone. Cathal was out getting firewood. When he heard the noise, he snuck up behind Karl and hit him with one of his sticks.”

“Is he still here?” Alex put a protective hand on his sword.

“No, that’s when things got really strange. Karl must have known they outnumbered him and gave up. He disappeared into thin air.” Celine knew by Brainard’s expression, that this was unheard of, even in mage circles.

Inver rubbed his chin, a disturbed look in his eyes. “The only way to do that is with dark magic.”

“What’s the difference between dark magic and regular magic?” Celine turned to Inver.

“Dark magic needs blood, preferably from a mage. The stronger their magic, the stronger the dark magic will be.”

“So, if you have no magic at all, can you still use dark magic?” Celine was unfamiliar with the intricacies of mage business.

“It is possible, but your magic will be a lot stronger and more refined if the user is a mage as well,” Inver replied. He shifted, turning to Alex. “We’re going to have to report this back to court. We can’t let him run loose around the country.”

“How soon do you think he’ll come back?” Celine worried for her new companions.

“He won’t want to waste any time now that he’s given himself away. We should immediately.” Alex looked to Brainard and Inver, who nodded in agreement.

“There’s a few out searching for Celine. As soon as they get back, we can go.” Brainard turned to Celine apologetically.

When Inver and Alex went back to the lodge to give the news to Galia, Celine lost no time in pulling Brainard aside. “Prince Alex doesn’t know who I am yet....could you...”

Brainard smiled. “You don’t want him to know?”

Celine shook her head, the words Alex said about the forced marriage still ringing in her ears.

“Leave it with me.” Brainard gave Celine’s arm a friendly squeeze.

Celine sat on Winston’s back as the breeze from the lake ruffled her cropped hair. “I can see why you like it here.” She turned to Alex. “It’s so peaceful.”

Despite Celine’s protests, Alex and Inver insisted on accompanying the group back to the capital. Something Celine had mixed feelings about. Glad as she was for the extra protection, she was unsettled by Alex and his

revelations. Besides, he didn't know who she really was, and she preferred to keep it that way until she could regain her original form.

Once they reached the main road, the group travelled quickly and by mid-afternoon they were entering the town of Avaglade. A few cheers went up when they rode into the square, Prince Alexander waved in response, greeting the various merchants and townspeople who came out to see him. A few children saw the colourful carnival wagons and came running; clapping in glee, hoping to see a performance.

"Is it always like this?" Celine asked Fiona, impressed by the enthusiastic response of the townspeople.

"Usually." Fiona waved politely as she sat tall and elegant on her horse, her red hair a flame around her. "They just want a show. It's not like any of them would ever invite us home for dinner."

"I don't know." Celine was hopeful. "Maybe things are different in Iasia. There was never a ban here."

"It would be nice." Fiona sighed wistfully. "It's wearing when people are suspicious of you all the time. I'd love to find a place where I could just settle down and be a part of things Travelling is exciting, but I don't want to do it forever." Her eyes settled on Bran, one of the fire dancers.

"What do you think?" Brainard drew up beside the girls. "Will we stay and give them a show? On our own terms?"

Fiona nodded, her flame-coloured hair catching the light of the sun. "Just let me get changed."

With practiced speed, the group put on their costumes and painted their faces; Fiona and Alanna slipping into form fitting acrobat costumes. Celine watched in awe; she had never appreciated the back-breaking work that went into entertainment. She clapped enthusiastically at the end of the performance; promising to herself never to take a performance for granted again.

"I don't have a tent with me, so I'm going to stay in the Oak's Head." Alex gestured to the inn across the square.

"Me too," Celine admitted. "I'm not really used to tents."

"Aren't you with the carnival?" Alex shot her an expression full of curiosity.

"I've joined....recently." Celine wasn't sure how much she wanted to divulge about herself at this point. She averted her eyes... clapping and smiling as Bran circled the crowd, twirling his fire stick. Feeling Alex's

eyes fixed on her, she turned to face him, noticing how the golden flecks in his eyes caught the light.

“What is it?” She felt that flutter twist in her stomach again.

“I’m glad you can enjoy yourself after the ordeal you went through... and I have this feeling I know you from somewhere... You remind me of someone.” His eyes fixed on hers.

“I do?” Celine’s heart gave a lurch. She lowered her head, brushing a curl out of her eyes.

“Yes.” Alex’s eyes were thoughtful.

“And you don’t know who?” Torn between being flattered that he remembered her, and worried about what would happen when he found out who she really was, Celine struggled to keep the tremor out of her voice.

“I don’t know.” Alex looked away, his eyes shadowed. “But it wouldn’t matter, anyway. I’m engaged.” A muscle in his jaw twitched as he turned away.

Celine drew a design in the dust with her toe. She didn’t dare think about what might happen if he wasn’t engaged. She sighed, realising how ridiculous it was to be jealous of herself.

“Will we go to the inn?” She smiled brightly at Alex. All she needed was a rest and a bit of time to think, she told herself. Everything would come together in time.

Leaving the group behind, they led their horses to the inn. “Alex.” The innkeeper, a hulking man, greeted the prince with a familiar tone.

“Oskar.” Alex returned the greeting, reaching out to return the man’s handclasp.

“And who is your young companion?” The innkeeper attempted to hide his nosiness by giving Alex a boisterous slap on the back.

“Oh, we’re not together—not really.” Celine rushed to reply, a blush staining her cheeks at the innkeeper’s curious look. “I’m with the carnival.”

The innkeeper nodded his understanding, but Celine saw unasked questions lingering in his eyes. “Will you be staying in your usual room, your highness?” He politely averted his gaze from Celine’s fiery cheeks.

“Yes. That would be great, and Inver will be here as well, he’s out back making sure the horses are all right.” The innkeeper nodded, taking Alex’s satchel and hefting it over his shoulder.

“Then you can have the red room.” The innkeeper directed his comment to Celine as he led her up a wooden staircase to a small but clean room on

the second floor.

“Is there any chance of having a bath?” Celine set her satchel down on the bed, hoping for an opportunity to get clean; the dip in the lake had been a while ago, and less than adequate.

Soon Celine found herself stepping into a steaming bath in a dented but clean tub. Rubbing the floral soap into her hair, Celine dipped her head under the water, closing her eyes in bliss as she let the warm water soothe her sore muscles. Drying off on a rough, but clean towel, she dressed and collected Tommy from the stable where he was peppering a bewildered Inver with questions.

“Come on Tommy.” She threw Inver an apologetic look as she dragged him away by the hand. “Time for dinner.”

Alex waved from across the room, a smile lighting up his face when he spotted the pair. “Over here.” He gestured to the empty seats at his table.

Celine slid into the seat. “The food smells delicious.” She lifted a slice of bread and slathered it with butter before setting it on Tommy’s plate. Tommy, too polite to ask for any, took it eagerly. The innkeeper placed bowls of creamy soup in front of them, and hungry after their journey, they dug in.

“This soup is an Iasian speciality.” Alex explained as he dipped his bread in his bowl. “We make it with cheese and bacon on top.”

“This stuff is good.” Tommy dipped his bread into the bowl.

“You can have as much as you want, young man.” Alex winked at Tommy, who’s mouth was too full to answer.

“I have to ask, if you’re not with the carnival, how did you even get involved with them?” they had finished their dinner, including a large pudding glazed with sugar and roasted nuts and Tommy had run back to the stable, presumably to annoy Inver with more questions.

“Gerta asked me for help with... something.... I couldn’t say no.” Celine traced the pattern on the red tablecloth. “I told them I would help bring them to safety; and I wanted to keep my word.” Celine hoped this explanation would be enough to satisfy him.

Alex’s amber eyes studying hers. “It’s unusual for someone in your position to associate with travellers like them. Especially in Lovan. Usually just tossing a coin or two is enough.”

“What do you mean, someone like me?” Celine lowered her lashes to avoid the intensity of his gaze.

“Well, it’s clear you’re from nobility. Your clothes might be plain, but they’re finely made, you carry a valuable sword, and your horse may not be flashy; but I’d wager he’s worth more than the whole carnival put together.”

Celine gulped. She hadn’t realized her position was that obvious.

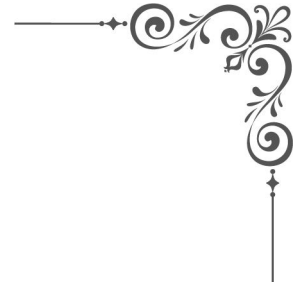
“Don’t worry, it isn’t as obvious as you think. Inver is trained to notice these kinds of things. It’s part of his job to be observant.” Alex said, reading her thoughts.

“Something happened at home.” Celine wanted to tell Alex everything, but wasn’t sure this was the right time. “It was too dangerous to be there anymore, and I had to leave. I hope to get back to fix everything soon as I can, but not until I make sure they’re safe.” Celine’s face was full of determination.

When it came to sharing how she freed the performers from Karl, Celine was more forthcoming in details. An expression of disgust and sorrow flashed through Alex’s eyes when she told him how Karl used the threat of the medallion to coerce them into making money for him. And when she explained about the trade in humans, he recoiled in disgust.

“If you need help with the Iasian side of things, let us know.” Alex frowned as he leaned back against the wooden chair. “For now, Inver and I will take the carnival performers to the capital. We can keep them safe until we apprehend Karl. Then, they can go their own way, in Iasia if they wish, or back to Lovan.

“Now we just need to find him and catch him.”



CHAPTER NINE

The sun streamed brightly across the village square, highlighting the vendors who had come early to set out their wares. Celine stopped at a stall and bought several packets of sweets, sharing them among the performers. Still munching, she crossed the square to Alex and Inver, who were waiting with the horses, their breath raising puffs of steam in the crisp morning air. A small tortoise-shell cat ran across the street and darted down the alley behind the bakery, presumably in pursuit of a fat mouse.

“Are they ready?” Alex patted his horse on the neck as the animal pawed the cobblestone street, eager to be on its way.

“Nearly.” Celine handed a packet of nuts to Alex before mounting Winston, taking care not to let the sword bang against the horse’s side as she swung into the saddle.

After some organizing, which included mediating a spat between Fiona and Arlo, the group set off; Fiona making a point of riding on the opposite end of the caravan from Arlo. Celine rolled her eyes and wondered how long this particular cold spell would last—everyone knew Arlo and Fiona couldn’t keep their eyes off each other. Celine and Alex took the rear position and Inver rode in front with Gerta and Brainard. Today Miranda left Brainard’s side and ride in the wagon with the acrobat troupe. They embraced her with open arms, scooting over to make room for her on the front bench.

“How much time do you think we have before Karl comes back?” Celine spoke in a low voice as she whispered to Alex; not wanting to alert the performers to her concern.

“It’s hard to say.” Alex furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “Brainard seems to think Karl has a friend—perhaps someone from the Lovanian court—who’s helping him. If he’s not working alone, he’ll regroup faster. Also, I’m getting the impression Karl’s desperate to get these performers back.”

“Wait a minute—the person helping Karl is from the *court*?” Brainard mentioned the person was influential, but she didn’t remember him talking about the court. “Did he say who he thought it was?” Her mind ran through the members of her father’s council. King Erich trusted all of them

implicitly; Celine had known them all her life and couldn't imagine a single one of them turning on them and their people.

"I don't think he knows. He just—" Alex cut off his words abruptly as he peered at her closely, a deep wrinkle forming between his eyes, "Your eyes look different. Yesterday they were a bit green and brown; but today they look blue."

Celine turned away, suddenly self-conscious. "It must be the light," she remarked dismissively, brushing her hand through her hair. It was growing faster than ever. Today it reached nearly to her chin, the weight of it causing the curls to straighten into tousled waves. She gave it a tug, secretly rejoicing in its new length.

Alex seemed to accept her explanation. Riding beside her in companionable silence, Celine took in the surrounding scenery. There were very few trees, instead tall coarse grass and a thick bristling plant covered the steep hillsides. Interspersed with the plants were rocks—giant boulders, grey jagged teeth against the windswept hills.

"That wool is one of Iasia's primary exports." Alex nodded toward a herd of sturdy animals scattered across a hillside. A black and white dog lay in the grass nearby, guarding his charges with a watchful eye.

"They're lovely." Celine studied at the animals. "Few people have sheep in Lovan. It's flat where I live, so more suited to cattle. What else do you have in this area?"

"Well, there's the granite." Alex pointed toward a large, speckled boulder near the path. "And the sea is east of here. We use it for trade and there's fishing as well. Penelope built a massive harbour, and at great expense."

"I remember. Are people recovering now?" Queen Penelope had taxed her people to starvation levels in order to complete her harbour.

Alex straightened with pride. "My mother was a big part of that. She does a lot of projects around weaving and felting, it puts the wool to good use and it gave people a trade to fill the gap. Their wealth is our wealth she always says."

"I like that." Celine smiled back at him, eyes sparkling. She knew her mother would have similar aspirations for the Lovanians.

A commotion on the path up ahead pulled them from their pleasant conversation. "What's going on?" Celine guided Winston to the front of the procession, which had stopped in its tracks.

“What’s happening?” Celine jumped down from Winston and raced to Gerta, who was lying on the ground; Brainard and Miranda hovering over her.

“It’s Gerta.” Flaming hair whipping in the wind, Fiona moved aside to let Celine lean over Gerta sprawled out on a patch of grass. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was shallow.

Miranda propped her head up, applying a strong smelling compress to her forehead.

“Has this happened before?” Celine turned to Fiona.

“It has, but very rarely. The only time I’ve actually seen this was when Gerta saw a vision; two weeks before you found us.”

That would have been the first time she had met Gerta, when she was Princess Celine. Celine counted the days in her head.

“What did you do to help her that time?”

“There’s not much you can do.” Miranda brushed back the strands of dark hair curled around Gerta’s face. “All we can do is wait until she comes out of it.” She adjusted the compress. “I’ll keep her comfortable until she comes around.”

The performers were getting restless, milling aimlessly, and some younger members of the group, including Tommy, looked like they were about to wander off.

“We’ll have our lunch here.” Celine decided. “And hopefully, Gerta will feel better soon.” She cast a worried glance at the sun. Time was soon going to run out; and she didn’t want to be stranded in the open.

Fiona brought out bread, sausage, and cheese she had bought at the market that morning and soon they were sitting down to a make-shift lunch. Fiona bringing some to Brainard and Miranda, who refused to leave Gerta’s side.

“Want some?” Alex handed Celine his flask, “It’s just cider.” He assured her when she gave it a suspicious look. She took a sip, enjoying the cool liquid that slid down her parched throat. She handed the flask back to him, inhaling the clean spicy soap he used; why did it have to smell so good?

“I think Gerta’s waking up.” Miranda called to them, distracting Celine from her wayward thoughts.

Gerta stirred, her eyelids fluttering weakly as she struggled to pry them open. She groaned, a ragged, harsh sound, then sat up with a start, a wild look in her eyes.

“Gerta, what is it?” Celine squeezed her hand.

“Danger... so much death.” Gerta mumbled, almost to herself as her legs thrashed involuntarily.

“Gerta, we’re all here and you’re safe. Did you see something?” Celine exchanged an anxious look with Alex, who hovered over her.

A tear ran down Gerta’s cheek, and her breathing evened.

“Here, let me make you comfortable.” Alex and Celine propped Gerta up on a colourful cushion as Miranda offered her a vile smelling drink from a clay mug.

“I know it doesn’t taste very good.” Miranda’s voice was apologetic, “But if you can get it down, it will help you feel better.”

Gerta held the mug in both hands and took a few swallows of the liquid, her face screwed up in distaste at the flavour of the muddy brown drink.

Celine smoothed Gerta’s hair back from her face, giving her time to collect herself.

“What I saw was horrible.” Gerta’s voice trembled, still shaken by her ordeal. “It was all the people he’d taken before. In a group like this, people come and go. Even though I always suspected Karl was up to no good, I didn’t understand why... or what Karl was doing exactly. But, he’s been selling them—the one’s with magic strong enough.... and....”

Celine kept rubbing Gerta’s shoulder, waiting for her to continue.

“He’s selling them to other magic users. And they’re being drained, their magic siphoned from their bodies. He chooses people nobody will miss. Orphan’s, widow, wanderers. But really,” here she shuddered, “Karl’s just a middleman. And he uses the carnival as cover, it gives him a way to travel around and find new prospects. If someone runs away to join the carnival, no one thinks twice about it.”

“Did you see anything else? Anything that would tell us where Karl is.” Celine prodded gently, hoping Gerta would have an inkling of what Karl’s future plans might be.”

Gerta took a few more sips from the mug, a bit of colour seeping into her cheeks. “He was in cold place. There was snow all around him.”

“Is he there now?”

Gerta nodded. “I think so. And he was with someone. I heard them talking. He was telling her soon—soon.”

“You think Karl’s returning for the rest of them soon?” Celine asked, she glanced at the other performers.

Gerta nodded, wiping a droplet from her upper lip. “Karl knows exactly what we’re doing... they’re both coming back; and with all that power at their disposal....” She wiped another tear leaking from her eyes.

Celine turned to Alex, “How long until we arrive at the Iasian castle?”

“At this pace?” Alex rubbed his chin. “Two or three days at least.”

“That’s too long.” Celine fingered her sword as she thought. “Do you think your father could send men to meet us if someone rode ahead?”

“That’s a good idea.” Alex turned to Inver, who had joined them.

“Could you ride ahead?”

“Your highness, it’s far too dangerous for you to stay here, you’d be Karl’s target as well.” A concerned expression flashed across Inver’s face. “It might be better if *you* went on ahead.”

“No, I’m not leaving them in danger.” Alex was firm.

“Well, then, respectfully speaking, your highness, I must remain here with you. I’ve sworn to your father to protect you. If I left you and something happened, I would never forgive myself.”

“I’ll go.”

The three swung around as Brainard stepped forward, joined by Cathal. “I’ll go with Brainard, I’ve got a fast horse. If you write the message in your handwriting, we can deliver it to the castle and lead them to you.”

Minutes later, the performers produced pen and paper, and Alex was scrawling a message to his father. He signed it with a flourish, handing it to Brainard, who tucked it carefully into the front of his tunic.

Subdued, the group moved on. Celine noticed that Fiona and Arlo had made up their differences, and were riding next to each other, Arlo tucked a strand of bright hair behind her ear as they murmured to each other. A pang of longing pierced Celine’s heart before she looked away, busying herself with her reins. *It wouldn’t be **that** bad...* she thought wistfully as she sneaked another glance at the couple... *if someone looked at me like that someday.*

“Ready?” Startled when she heard Alex’s voice behind her, Celine’s cheeks burned.

The pair took up the rear of the procession, this time eyes warily scanning their surroundings for signs of lurking danger. But all they saw were sheep grazing on the surrounding hillsides.

“Where would there be snow this time of year?” Celine asked Alex, trying not to notice how the mountain breeze swept his dark hair off his

forehead. She sneaked another look, her heart fluttering when she caught his dark eyes looking back. He swallowed, turning his head.

“In Iasia? Just the western mountains. But they’re along the border, it would take weeks to travel there if you were going a traditional way. “The western mountains are only known for their vast deposits of gold and copper, some of Iasia’s most profitable exports, but nothing else. The road is rough and long.”

“Do you think that’s where Karl went?”

“It’s hard to know, for sure. But I’m worried that he’s found a way to transport himself from one place to another very quickly using the magic he’s stolen. I just wish I knew what he was planning next. Gerta’s vision was patchy.” They both looked at Gerta, who, clinging bravely to her mule, was at the front of line riding next to Miranda. Heads close, the two were deep in conversation.

“We’ll stop to make camp within the hour.” Celine’s eyes snapped open. She had been nodding off over Winston’s neck. Who, far too well-mannered to take advantage of her lax direction, plodded along, keeping pace with the others. Even from her spot at the back of the procession, Celine could see that the group was lagging, worn out from the gruelling pace they had set.

“There’s been no sign of him yet.” Again Celine searched the sparse hillsides surrounding them. The air was cooler here; fresh with the smell of wind and grass. In spite of the bright sun and cloudless blue sky, Celine sensed a shadow. She turned, eyes narrowed as she searched for the shadow’s source.

“Do you feel that?” she asked Alex. A sudden chill seeped into the breeze and despite the cloudless sky, the air thickened. Celine shivered, apprehension coating the back of her throat.

“I don’t see anything.” Although his words were confident, Alex tightened his grip on the reins and quickened his pace.

A ringing filled the air, so faint it was almost imperceptible; accompanied by a metallic tang that filled Celine’s nostrils with an acrid sting. Smoke mingled with magic.

“Do you think it’s Karl?” Celine asked Alex, dreading the answer to this question.

Concern clouded Alex’s face as he gave Celine a protective glance. “Something’s out there. I’m going to find Inver, if we’re prepared, maybe we can fight him. He might be strong, but we’ve got numbers on our side.”

Alex urged his horse to the front of the line, speaking in intense tones to Inver, who nodded in response.

A shadow passed over the sun, far too large for a bird.

“Dragon.” shouted Alex. “Everybody run.”

Celine looked around wildly. They were out in the open, there was no cover in the spare grass covered hills. The girls huddled in the wagon, and the tired horses, fuelled by adrenalin, raced madly down the rough path, scattering stones in their wake.

There were three of them.

Giant grey creatures, with long ugly snouts, covered head to toe in rough scales. Celine had never seen a dragon before. Dragons were mountain creatures and preferred to live as far from humans as possible, rarely venturing far from their territories, which they protected voraciously. She looked on in horror as one swooped low, hovering over one of the horses; which screamed in fear and as the horrific creature came inches from scraping long jagged claws along its back.

Leaning low over Winston’s back, Celine tried to make herself as small as he pelted on, squealing when a dragon blew a streak of smoky flame toward them. Luckily, the grass was too damp to catch on fire, and only smouldered, leaving a charred patch of ground behind. Suddenly, Celine felt herself being lifted into the air, the sound of rushing wind filling her ears as leathery wings beat against the sky.

“No!” she heard Alex shout as they plunged up into the blue.

The ground beneath Celine was so far down, the performers were mere specks. Upturned faces staring in shock and wretched horror. Celine closed her eyes against the cold wind that whistled around her. The other two dragons wheeled, following, leaving the performers. Cracking her eyes open again, Celine saw one of the wagons burst into flames, the blaze filling the air with billowing smoke.

Celine didn’t open her eyes again until she found herself dropped on a patch of bare rocky ground. Nearby was a cave, the dragon’s lair she assumed. She lay in a heap, preparing to be roasted by another streak of dragon’s flame.

“We’re not going to eat you if that’s what you’re thinking.” The voice was rough, gravelly.

“Yes, its me. We do speak human, you know.” The dragon lay on the ground, tucking its paws underneath it. “I’m awfully sorry to do this to

you. But we didn't have a choice. *He* took one of our eggs." The beady eyes looked almost apologetic. "I had to scare everyone, of course, but I tried not to do too much damage."

Celine rolled her shoulders, realizing aside from stiff muscles and windburned cheeks, the dragon hadn't actually harmed her. In fact, he had been almost gentle. She shivered, looking at the razor sharp claws.

"Hugo. Was it really necessary—the fire?" the dragon scolded his companion as the other two landed beside him, tucking their ungainly legs underneath bulky bodies.

"Sorry." Hugo lowered his head, folding his wings up. "I got overexcited."

"Well, see that you don't do it again. There were humans inside that wagon. You know we don't like to cause trouble for them. Don't worry dear, they got out in time. So delicate about the heat, you humans."

"Wait? You can talk?" Celine rubbed her eyes in disbelief.

"Of course we can talk. We are dragons, we speak dragon plus many human languages." Hugo tossed his head proudly.

"Shush Hugo, this one clearly hasn't been educated about our kind." The other dragon's voice was apologetic.

"Now, we don't have much time. That man will come back soon."

Hugo blew an angry puff of smoke from his nostrils, sending Celine skittering back a few paces. "If he didn't have our egg Mildred, I'd set him on fire. In fact, I'm still thinking about it." His large golden eyes gleamed.

"Now, now. You know we don't involve ourselves with the humans. Not since... well, you know..." Mildred's voice trailed off as she threw Celine a significant look.

"When did he say he was coming?" the other dragon looked at the sun, now a pink ribbon on the western horizon.

"He'll be here soon. He seemed keen to capture this particular human."

"Are you sure we got the right one?" Hugo peered at Celine, squinting his glowing eyes into long yellow slits. "They all look the same."

Celine sat up, huffing. "We do not all look the same."

"Of course you don't my dear." Mildred's voice was soothing.

"Yes, we did. He wanted the one with the change of appearance potion on them. She was the only possibility—you are a female human, aren't you?" she turned politely to Celine.

“Er—yes.” Celine’s head was spinning. “But what do you mean, a change of appearance potion? You can see potions?”

“Of course.” Mildred wafted a long spiky tail, waving it dangerously close to Celine. “Especially an amateur one like that; I can see it’s falling apart on you. Whoever made it was very poorly trained.” She sniffed.

“Can you *do* change of appearance potions?” Celine’s voice was incredulous.

“Of course my dear child’s play, all dragons can; but we don’t need to make a fiddly old potion.... we just... do it.” Mildred waved a scaly claw.

“So, you can change me back to how I was before?”

“Like this?” Closing his golden eyes, Hugo blew out a stream of blue flame from his nostrils. Celine shied back, falling on the rocks, but instead of the burning pain she was expecting, a cool tingling sensation enveloped her. In an instant it was over. Celine lifted a hand to her head, feeling the strange yet somehow familiar weight tugging on her scalp. Her hair had grown back, she realized, the golden strands running through her fingers and cascading down her back.

“Thank you.” Eyes glistening with grateful tears, she turned to Hugo; reaching out a tentative hand to pat him on the neck. It was rough like tree bark and strangely hot.

“No problem, it’s the least I could do.” Hugo gave her hand a pointed look and Celine yanked it back quickly.

A scuffling behind Celine drew her attention away from the dragons.

“Oh good, you got her.” Karl puffed, his cheeks red and winded from his climb up the side of the rocky hill.

“Yes, dragons always keep their promises.” Mildred drew herself up, a regal look on her ugly face. “Now where is my egg, we must have it before it gets cold; or there will consequences.”

“Not so fast.” Karl tutted at Mildred, who flicked her tail impatiently. Hand in his pockets, he strolled in a circle around Celine, who put her hand to her sword protectively.

Mildred sat back on her haunches, waiting for Karl to make his next move. “All right, dragons. You didn’t have to remove the changing spell, but I’ll overlook it. Your egg is a cave by the lake at the bottom of the mountain. I’ve left a fire burning in front of it as a marker. Now, disarm her and you and go.”

“Disarming her wasn’t part of our bargain.” So quickly Celine thought she imagined it, Hugo winked. Then, in a flash of movement, the dragons leapt into the air, beating their leathery wings.

Realizing this was her chance, Celine drew her sword, lunged toward Karl. Turning, Karl lazily flicked a finger, batting the sword away with a wrench of power. Gritting her teeth, Celine tried again, this time gripping the sword with both hands and swinging with all her might. Karl smiled—spiteful, taunting. “I have to admit, your tenacity is admirable. You never *do* stop trying, do you?” he mocked, keeping her at bay with his power.

A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Celine’s face as she poised herself to strike another blow. Karl must have a weakness somewhere, but what could it be? Her eyes ran over him as her mind raced through all the possibilities, and she tried to remember the little—very little—she had learned about fighting with magic.

“Giving up so soon?” Karl took a step closer, confident he had bested her. Celine clenched every muscle, forcing her body to remain still as Karl strolled toward her. One more step was all she needed to put her plan into action.

Holding his hand in front of him, Karl took another step, close enough for Celine to make her move. Stooping down, she picked up a jagged rock, hurling it at him with all her might. Karl snapped up his hand. But as Celine suspected, Karl’s magic was only designed for weapons. The rock sailed right through his defences, glancing off his shoulder. “You little hellcat.” Karl’s face twisted in fury as he raised his hand again, shooting out a shower of sparks.

Celine dodged the sparks, singing the edge of her cloak as she reached for another rock, aiming for Karl’s head, but hitting him in the chest. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to distract Karl from warding against her sword, and she got in a swing, slicing his leg.

Karl narrowed his eyes, readying himself to fight back, but Celine was too quick. She whipped up her sword, pressing the point against his neck. “One move and you’re dead.” She warned, using the sword to nudge Karl into a seated position. She leaned in just hard enough to draw a thin trickle of blood. “Now, tell me who you’re selling those people to.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Karl’s voice pitched high in desperation as she forced him against the rocky ground. Celine prodded him with the sword, nudging the soft skin. Karl squealed.

“All right, I’ll tell you.”

Celine eased the sword enough to let him speak. “Now talk.”

“It was Lord Remy.”

“Remy?” Celine was flabbergasted. The tubby little man on Father’s council seemed far too innocent for such dark dealings.

“He’s obsessed with magic. Once he got a taste for the dark magic, he wanted more. That’s what it does.” Karl’s voice was a whine. A sheen of sweat coated his forehead. “Now let me go.” He pleaded.

Celine laughed. “I might let you live, but I’m certainly not going to let you go.”

“Well, at least let’s leave this godforsaken place. We can go back to the castle—anywhere.” Karl’s worked his throat as he cast a glance at the darkening sky.

“All right, we’ll go back to the castle. Now start walking,” Celine urged up to his feet.

“What, you mean walk? Why don’t you just let me get us there with magic?”

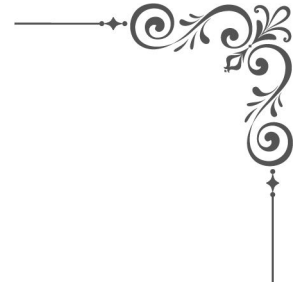
Celine needled him with the sword. “I like the fresh air.” She said the words dryly, forcing him down the path in front of her. She took off her belt and used it to his wrist together. “Now get moving.”

Still complaining, Karl began picking his way through the rocky terrain. Just as Celine was scanning the rocks for looking the easiest way down, a high keening cry tore through the air. Ignoring the sword, Karl dropped to the ground, covering his head with his bound hands. A shadow crossed the sky, it was two dragons, streaking down like silver bolts of lightning.

“You have cracked our egg.” Fury filled Mildred’s voice as she swooped low, perching on a boulder.

“No, it wasn’t me.” Karl insisted, his voice muffled. “The egg had already cracked when I got it.”

“A dragon never cracks its egg.” The dragon’s voice boomed. “How dare you treat one of our eggs this way, you insignificant little *insect*?” Celine leapt back just in time as a torch of sulfur smelling flame ripped through the air, Karl screamed once, his body jerked violently and was still; his singed form still frozen in its huddled position.



CHAPTER TEN

A ribbon of heavy smoke tinged the air. Celine froze in place, hardly daring to breathe. Spits of fire were still emerging from Mildred's nostrils and Celine came to with a start, beating out the flying sparks to prevent her cloak from catching fire.

"The egg, is it going to be all right?" Celine asked, stepping back. In spite of their friendliness, the dragons were more than a bit intimidating.

"It's cracked." Mildred sniffed and a great tear, steaming with sulphur, rolled down her scaly cheek.

"We can't move our egg if it's cracked." Hugo explained, patting Mildred on the back awkwardly with his giant clawed foot. "We usually carry eggs in our mouth, it would be too dangerous for the egg."

"I can carry it for you." Fuelled by gratefulness and a desire to help the dragons, the words flew out of Celine's mouth before she could stop them.

"Really?" Mildred raised her head hopefully. "You would do that after we handed you over to Karl?"

"Of course." Celine poured as much confidence as possible into her voice. "You did just save me after all." Celine pointedly ignored the fact that the dragons had mere minutes before professed not to kill humans.

"Hop on then, I'll take you to the cave." After some effort, Celine scrambled up to sit on Mildred's shoulders; using her cloak as a cushion to protect her from the heat. Dragons *were much* warmer than humans.

"Ready?" Mildred turned her enormous head, batting huge lashes over her golden eyes. Flapping her wings, she took off. Celine leaned forward clutching Mildred's neck.

"Sorry. I'm not used to carrying humans." Mildred wheeled in the air, and Celine bit back a yelp as she glanced down. Mildred was soaring at a terrifying height, so high the trees looked like small toys far underneath them. Within minutes, they were settling at a lake where an anxious Quinn was waiting for them, pacing outside the mouth of the cave.

"It's all right Quinn." Mildred leaned down so Celine could slide off. "Celine is going to carry the egg back for us."

Celine stepped over a pile of bat droppings as she peered into the dark, gloomy interior of the cave. She choked at the musty smell filling her lungs

as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. There, a pale oval leaning up against a rock, was the egg. The size of a large watermelon, it pulsed with a glowing light that slivered through a jagged crack running up the length of the egg.

“Is all right if I lift it?” She glanced back at the dragons who had poked their heads inside to watch.

The dragons nodded; three pairs of unwavering golden eyes fixed on her. She wrapped her hands in her cloak before lifting the egg, nesting it securely in her tunic. Cradling her precious cargo, she climbed back onto Mildred’s back.

The moon was rising when they arrived at the lair. Nothing more than a rough hole in the side of a craggy cliff, it didn’t appear impressive from the outside. Celine followed the dragons into the hole, clambering over the peaks of the jagged rocks.

The entrance opened into a giant cavern, a high ceiling arched above a wide sandy floor. Streaks of faint moonlight highlighted mounds of gold and other precious objects piled casually along the walls. More treasure than in the entire kingdom of Lovan, no doubt. In the distance was the sound of rushing water, an underground river.

“Where do you want me to put your egg?” Celine tore her eyes from the fantastic surroundings as she turned to Mildred.

“Follow me. I’ll lead you to the nursery.” Mildred led her through a tunnel in the back of the cavern. This one contained a nest, fashioned from gold coins spread in the middle of the floor. Celine carefully settled the egg into the nest, being very careful not to jar it. She felt the egg vibrate under her hands as she set it down.

Mildred sighed in relief. “I can’t tell you how worried I was. We dragons are in your debt.” She bowed her head graciously.

“Thank you.” Celine shifted uneasily under the weight of the golden eyes. “Could you deliver me to the Iasian royal castle?”

“Of course, my dear.” Mildred hovered over the nest, cooing gently to the egg, still pulsing with glowing light. “Hugo can take you.”

Realizing she was being dismissed, Celine made her way back to the main cave, pausing once or twice to get peer at the treasures piled along the sides of the tunnel. Truly amazing, she thought, stepping over a pearl the size of a hen’s egg that must have rolled out of position.

“Excuse me, Hugo? Mildred said you could escort me to the castle?” Celine turned to Hugo, recognizing him by his size and the darker colour of

his scales.

Hugo shook, stretching and yawning like a large cat. “of course. Which castle are we going to?”

“To the Iasian royal castle.”

An hour later Hugo settled in a large meadow near the castle, startling a few cows as his bulk settled in the field. Not wanting to draw the attention of any guards, Celine had asked Hugo to leave her near the city, not in it. He accepted her thanks with a cheerful wave of his claw, then swooped away, diving high into the sky. Celine brushed the worst of the dirt and sand off her tunic, hoping she didn’t smell too much like sulphur and trudged toward the castle gates.

Ten minutes later the rain began. Not just any rain, a deluge, heavy sheets of rain punctuated by thunder and lightning. Celine was instantly soaked and chilled to the bone. The downpour drenched her, soaking her long hair, which hung from her head in heavy ropes. The wind cut through her wet clothes and stung her eyes. Even on the well marked road to the castle, it was hard to see the edge of the road. Doggedly, Celine kept going, only pausing occasionally to brush rivulets of water from her eyes. A few times, she jumped, startled by the crash of lightning, so close she could smell its white hot trail of fire.

When she arrived at the gates, it was late. The guardhouse windows were dark, only a small lamp in front of the gatehouse still burned. Celine knocked on the heavy wooden door, hoping someone—anyone—would hear her over the roar of the storm. No one answered. Celine sighed, maybe she could shelter under a tree. Just as she was turning away, the gatehouse door cracked open.

“State your business, please.” A guard stood at the door, bleary eyes clouded with sleep.

“I’m here to speak to King Ruben and Queen Abigail.” Celine managed to get out through her chattering teeth. “It’s Princess Celine of Lovan.”

“Princess. What are you doing outside? I’ll escort you to your chamber immediately.” The guard snapped a salute, instantly recognizing Celine.

Dripping muddy puddles on the polished floor, Celine followed the guard down the labyrinth of passages leading to the guest wing.

“Here you are.” the guard opened the heavily carved door.

“Your highness?” the guard turned questioningly toward Celine as a compact form sat up on the bed.

“What’s going on?” Celine’s doppelganger clutched at the lace neckline of her nightdress, blue eyes wide.

Flustered, the guard flicked his eyes from one girl to the other.

“This is highly unusual,” he muttered, out of his depth.

“She’s an imposter. I’m Celine.” Swiping a strand of sopping hair out of her eyes, Celine nearly cried in frustration. How had Cherry gotten here so soon? Even with the delays, she assumed she would have at least a few days head start.

“Sorry, your highness, it looks as if there has been some sort of mix-up.” The gatehouse guard apologized to the girl in the bed as he took Celine by the elbow, steering her away from the chamber door.

“But, *I’m* Celine.” She protested, her heart sinking as the guard closed the door firmly.

“Shh... you’re disturbing the important guests.” The guard gripped her arm in warning.

“But, I’m the princess, not her.” Celine stomped her foot. She thought now that she looked like Celine again, everything would be easy. Apparently, she was wrong.

“Wait, where are you taking me?”

The guard led Celine down a series of staircases. The corridor narrowed as the paintings and rugs gave way to bare, utilitarian walls.

“We can’t have you bothering the Lovanian princess.” The guard manhandled Celine into a small windowless room with only a plain desk and two chairs to break the sparseness. “Sit here.” He pointed to one of the chairs and lit a candle before leaving, snapping the iron bolt into place behind him.

With only the flickering light for company, Celine slumped in the hard wooden chair to wait. Minutes turned into hours as the candle spluttered out, leaving Celine in complete darkness.

A scraping of the iron bolt alerted Celine that someone was coming. Rubbing the exhaustion from her eyes, Celine straightened in the chair.

“So, you say *you’re* the princess?” An older man accompanied the guard. Celine recognized his neat grey moustache from her time on the diplomatic visit.

“Hello General Neville.” Celine greeted him as he pulled the chair up to the desk, steepling his fingers underneath his chin.

“I must say, you do favour her.” His keen eyes scanned Celine. By now her hair had dried and although tangled, its golden length shone with its former brightness.

“I don’t favour her, I *am* her.” Celine said, her throat burning. She knew expressing her anger wouldn’t get her any closer to achieving her goal.

General Neville leaned forward, his iron grey hair painfully tidy even for this early hour. “We’ll escort you to Ruben and Abigail after breakfast. They’ll decide what to do about this—ahem—unusual situation.” General Neville eyed Celine’s sword cautiously. If you could leave your weapon with us, Lydan here can find you a place to sleep for the night.

“Thank you.” Celine handed over her sword and followed Lydan toward the guest wing. Dawn had broken, the darkness giving way to pale grey light. He took Celine to a chamber at the end of the corridor; a chamber with three guards posted outside.

General Neville wasn’t taking any chances. Celine thought as she wondered if they posted guards to Cherry’s room. Exhausted, Celine fell into a dreamless sleep, only stirring when she heard a rapping at the chamber door.

Celine sat up, shielding her eyes against the sun streaming through open curtains. “Hello there.” She addressed her comment to the brown-haired girl who flitted through the chamber, building up the fire and fluffing cushions.

“Good morning, your highness.” The girl turned, a wide smile on her face. “Louise?” Celine recognized the girl as the one she had run into in the hallway.

The girl curtsied. “I’m awfully glad to see you back Princess Celine.”

“You know it’s me?” Tears of joy and relief sprang into Celine’s eyes.

“Oh, yes.” Louise smiled shyly at Celine. “Whoever that other person is might fool the nobles and the king and queen, but she doesn’t even try to hide who she really is around us. Poisonous girl. We knew right away.”

“But *how*?”

“Do you remember the night of the ball? When you stopped to help me pick up my tray? It was my first day working at the castle; that meant the world to me. Well, that other girl—whatever her real name is—she would never do a thing like that. She’s nothing like you, she’s made at least five of the serving maids cry already. A few of them refuse to go near her chamber anymore. Of course, in public she’s as sweet as anything—please this and

thank you that.” Louise sniffed before continuing on. “You can’t imagine how relieved we were when we heard the news that you arrived last night. That’s why I volunteered to come help you this morning.”

“Volunteered?”

“Oh yes, General Neville wasn’t going to send anyone, poisonous creature has him fooled too, but we know if you’re going to have a chance against her you’ll need our help. The dressmaker is going to come up later and fit you. It shouldn’t be hard, she’s been in with the other one all week, You’re the same size. I’ll draw you a bath and send in Ari before you go out, Ari’s the best with hair.” With another curtsy, Louise left, closing the door behind her with a click.

A few hours later Celine was ready. She had been bathed and primped as never before, her hair coiled and pinned into smooth curls and her borrowed dress, one of gold silk, shining and smooth.

“You’re beautiful, your highness.” Louise’s eyes filled with satisfaction as she looked at Celine. “They’ll know for sure now that you’re the real princess. There’s only one more thing.” Louise into the drawer of the vanity and pulled out a velvet-covered box. Inside was a delicate headpiece, sparkling with diamonds and sapphires. The deep blue of the stones matched Celine’s eyes perfectly. Settling it on Celine’s head, she stepped back.

Strengthened by the encouraging words and the weight of the tiara on her head, Celine opened the chamber door.

“I’m ready.” She signalled to the guards, then trailed by all three guards, Celine swept down the corridor to the audience room.

She paused in the doorway. A long aisle stretched before her and at the end of it King Ruben and Queen Abigail presided on their dais, flanked by the two princes. Celine swallowed, walking slowly toward them. Heads turned as she passed through the crowd. News of Celine’s predicament must have spread because curious citizens packed the audience hall; all wanting to see the mirror image princesses. Out of the corner of her eye, Celine caught sight of Fiona and Cathal. She must have changed more than she thought, as Celine realized with a pang they didn’t recognize her. Straightening her spine she continued to walk; dropping into a deep curtsy at the base of the throne.

“Your majesties.” She murmured as she rose and took her place in an empty seat beside them.

The gong sounded, and heads turned back to the doorway. Cherry—as Princess Celine—was announced. Dressed in an expensive gown sparkling with jewels, she glided up the aisle, curtsying prettily and taking the remaining empty seat.

The crowd whispered among themselves, heads turning from one girl to the other. Even in a kingdom where magic was part of daily life, this was unprecedented. Celine sneaked a look at Cherry, who glared back before quickly recovering—simpering at the crowd.

“People of Iasia.” King Ruben’s voice rang out, silencing the murmurs of the crowd. “We have made a decision.”

Celine held her breath, waiting to hear what conclusion King Ruben and Queen Abigail had come to.

“Both girls claim to be princess Celine. It would not be fitting for us to make a final conclusion without input from the royal family of Lovan. As a result, we will keep both girls under protection until we can obtain assistance from Lovan.”

At this news, a rumble of discontent spread through the crowd.

“However.” King Ruben raised his voice so everyone could hear him above the rumbling crowd. “We will have a series of five tests that the princesses must pass. We will present the results of the test to the royal family of Lovan for their consideration.”

Celine felt sweat gather at the base of her spine as she wondered what kind of tests the king and queen of Iasia might see fit to devise.

“Do you agree?” King Ruben trapped Celine under the weight of his gaze.

“I do.” She met his gaze evenly. After all, what else could she say? After Cherry also agreed to undertake the tests, King Ruben turned back to the crowd.

“I will reveal the details of the first test tomorrow at noon. Until then I dismiss you.” The king waved his hand at the two girls.

Celine stood. It took all her strength to keep her face from revealing her uncertainties. She flicked her eyes to prince Alex, who stared straight ahead, impassive. The three guards arrived to escort Celine back to her chamber; as she followed them out, she heard the rumble of the crowd reacting to the shocking news.

“How did it go?” Louise was waiting by the door, eager to hear Celine’s report.

“I don’t know.” Celine collapsed onto a chair by the window, bewildered by the strange turn of events. “They’re doing some sort of tests.”

“Oh, the princess tests.” Louise nodded wisely. “We haven’t had the tests in over a hundred years. But I can see how King Ruben and Queen Abigail might want to bring them back for this predicament. I’m sure you can win. How much can Cherry really know about what it means to be a princess?”

“But isn’t that so archaic?” Celine sat at the vanity so Louise could take the pins out of her hair. “What kind of tests are they anyway?” the princess tests weren’t a part of Lovanian history and Celine only had a vague idea about what they might entail.

“There’s five tests.” Louise began combing Celine’s golden mane, using her fingers to rub out the soreness left by the tight pins. “Usually, the tests follow whatever is happening currently—the needs of the kingdom. For example, in times of war they might have tests of strength and swordsmanship.”

“I hope they have swordsmanship.” Celine was confident she could best Cherry in a match.

“Do you think you can find out what they’re planning?” Celine turned to Louise.

“I could try.” Louise was hesitant. “But those kinds of plans don’t always filter down to us servants.”

A knock at the door interrupted the two girls.

“Sarah?” Celine dashed to greet her lady-in-waiting.

“Oh, I’m so glad you came back.” Sarah embraced her old friend. “I thought I was going crazy. You have to stop her, she’s completely mad.”

Celine’s eyes filled with concern. “Are you all right?” she said, noticing bags under Sarah’s eyes and new lines tracing the corners of her eyes.

Sarah sank down on the bed. “I’m fine, just a bit tired. I’m just so glad you’re all right. Frederick and Lucie spoke to me before I left. They hadn’t heard from you in a while and had an idea you were coming this way. She talked King Erich’s council into letting her come early.”

“And the people in Lovan, what do they think of Cherry?”

“Cherry has the council wrapped around her finger, and she seems to have fooled your father and your mother. They wouldn’t listen to Frederick

or Lucie, even when they brought me to speak to them. Although Cherry kept to herself at the Lovanian castle, I think she knew people would suspect if she spent too much time with them, so she stayed in her chamber most of the time. But she wasn't really trying much with the rest of us—you know—the servants."

"Can you monitor Cherry, let me know what she's up to?" Celine searched Sarah's eyes.

"She's secretive, so it's hard to know what she's planning." Sarah admitted. "She warmed up to Lord Remy, though. She even spent a few afternoons in the library with him before we left."

Apprehension gripped Celine. "Did accompany her to the library on these outings with Lord Remy?"

Sarah shook her head. "She went alone, but Lord Remy gave her some things—artifacts. That's what I came here to tell you about. Cherry has a locked chest, a chest appeared in your chamber after she had gone to meet Lord Remy in the library one day; and I haven't been able to find the key for it. You know how I always do the packing and unpacking."

Celine nodded. Sarah had always been responsible for all of Celine's things.

"I think Cherry must keep the key on her person."

"Could you take it while she's in the bath?" Celine tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"No, she doesn't like anyone around when she's bathing. I tried once, to see if I could find it, and she shooed me away. Cherry still thinks she has me fooled, and I didn't want to make her suspicious."

"We'll think of something." Celine spoke confidently; but couldn't shake off her concerns about Lord Remy and what strange items he might have had in that trunk. "Let Cherry think you're on her side and keep trying to get into the trunk. And make sure her guards don't see you, I don't know who we can trust yet."

Not wanting to draw suspicion, Sarah slipped out of the room a short time later, taking a tray and keeping her head down as she hurried past the guards.

The next day, the crowd in the audience hall had swelled; everyone was eager to hear what the first test was going to be. The crowd was so big, the adjoining room had to be opened up to accommodate them. Even then people spilled onto the balcony and into corridors. Celine held her head

high and wore her most regal expression as she glided up the aisle. Once again, she dropped into a low curtsy in front of the king, queen and the two princes. This time she was brave enough to glance at Alex's face, examining it for any sign of recognition. Her heart sank as he only smiled politely, waiting as she took her seat.

This time, Cherry had arrived first and shot Celine a triumphant glance as she sat down, an expression so fleeting that Celine wondered if she had imagined it.

King Ruben nodded to the uniformed man standing beside the throne. Unrolling an official-looking parchment, he began to read.

"The princess tests will comprise the following five tests."

"Test one—strength—sword play." Celine nearly squealed in delight—everyone knew she loved the sword; there was no way Cherry would ever win that test.

"Test two—knowledge." Celine wasn't sure what kind of knowledge they were looking for. However, she was confident she had been well trained for her position. That one shouldn't be too hard either.

"Test three." the aide continued in an important voice, interrupting Celine's thoughts. "Diplomacy and politics. It will require the candidates to go through a series of situations to display their diplomatic skills and abilities."

"Test four, grace. It will require the candidates to show their grace in dancing, deportment, and talents. And finally, test five. Heart. The candidates will have to show they have the heart of a princess."

Celine wrinkled her brow. The first four tests she felt fairly confident about, but the last test was a mystery. Celine pressed her lips together in determination. She would just have to do her best—she hadn't come this far to lose.

Celine slid her eyes to Cherry, whose face was serene.

Like a princess, Celine thought bitterly to herself, turning her attention back to the audience hall. She scanned the crowd, her eyes resting on a familiar face. Gerta—wrapped in a colourful shawl—the woman smiled encouragingly at her. But before Celine could signal to her, the girls were being dismissed. Every eye bored into her back as Celine somehow made her way back down the aisle, forcing her eyes to focus on the doorway ahead.

The next morning was bright—not a cloud marred the clear blue sky as Louise helped Celine dress for the sword competition. A leather tunic fitted to her measurements and soft breeches gave her the flexibility she would need for her manoeuvres.

“Eat this.” Louise pushed a plate across the tray—until public interest died down, most of the girls’ meals were being delivered to their chambers. Celine’s stomach rolled at the sight of the heavy food; she could never eat eggs, sausage, or bacon in this state. Knowing she needed her strength, she took a cup of tea with plenty of milk and sugar and nibbled a slice of toast. It felt dry and powdery in her mouth despite the butter and marmalade Louise had slathered on it.

Pulling on her boots, Celine flipped the simple braid over her shoulder and followed the guards as they led her toward the arena. Cherry was already there, and Celine reeled in shock at the outfit Cherry deemed appropriate for a sword fighting match. Sheer flowing trousers—containing so much fabric they were sure to get tangled around her legs—and a matching top. Low cut with long floating sleeves. Her confidence boosted by Cherry’s apparent lack of knowledge about appropriate fighting apparel, Celine took the sword one guard handed her.

“Thanks, Hans.” She nodded at the guard. Hans’s stern expression cracked in a slight smile as he received her thanks.

Celine strode to the middle of the arena, ignoring the crowds of people that pressed up against the railings, all eager to see the spectacle. Cherry was waiting, her hair loose, a golden cloud of silk around her face.

Celine bowed, then assumed her position, carefully eyeing Cherry for signs of weakness.

A gong sounded, and the match began. Celine raised her sword and sprang forward. To her surprise, Cherry met her, striking back with such speed and precision the Celine reeled back with the force of her blade. A chill ran up Celine’s spine, Cherry was good. Far better than anyone in her station should be. Celine struck again, aiming for the other girl’s left side, hoping they shared the same weaknesses.

A cruel smile crossed Cherry’s face as she flicked her wrist. The arena rang with the sound of metal meeting metal. Another clash as Cherry met Celine’s sword evenly. Beads of sweat gathered around her hairline and ran down her temple as Celine fought her deadly dance with the other girl. Cherry wasn’t even breathing hard. Finally, she tapped the other girl on the

left arm. Not a precise hit—but a hit. A fierce expression of fury crossed Cherry's face as she glanced at her arm. With a shout, she swung her sword violently at Celine. Celine danced back, feeling the breeze as the weapon whistled past her head.

Thinking she had the upper hand, Celine lunged forward, but her muscles froze and she faltered mid swing. Cherry's eyes glinted as lips barely moving. She whispered a few words under her breath. Celine struggled to move her arms, but couldn't; it was like they were stuck in a thick syrupy liquid. A moment later, and her sword was lying on the ground.

"And here is our victor." The weapons master was lifting Cherry's arm in the air, showing she was the winner of the match.

Celine's heart sank as she realized no one realized Cherry had cheated; no one would believe her if she complained. There were no signs of cheating no wrong moves on Cherry's part. Her eyes searched arena, hoping someone, anyone, would stand up and say something. The crowd was cheering, assuming Cherry was the clear victor of the match.

Celine reached out her hand to give Cherry the victors handclasp. When their hands touched, a strange metallic spark jolted through her fingers. Magic. This magic was unpleasant, almost sticky as it oozed up Celine's spine.

She jerked her hand back and bowed to the cheering crowd. Still stinging from the humiliation, Celine escaped the arena as soon as possible. As she was slinking back into the castle with her guards, Alex approached her.

Raising a finger for the guards to wait, Alex drew Celine through a side door into a servant's entrance. "Did she use magic on you?" Alex questioned her, a concerned look in his eyes.

"Why do you think that?" Celine didn't think anyone had noticed the strange moment between the two girls.

"I thought I felt something," Alex admitted. "I can sense magic from a distance—if it's powerful enough, but I wasn't sure if it was her or someone in the crowd. It happened exactly the moment she disarmed you, I assumed it was a motion ward to slow you down."

"It was magic." Celine lowered her voice. "She used it to cheat. Did anyone else notice?"

"They didn't." Alex sounded almost disappointed. "But I know that you're the real Celine, I only met you once, but I know you well enough

that you'd never cheat in a match. I want to help you; but we'll have to catch your imposter in the act if we want to prove wrongdoing. I need a signal so I can tell you apart from her, and we'll talk later." An apologetic look flashed across Alex's face. "It's just that you look so much alike."

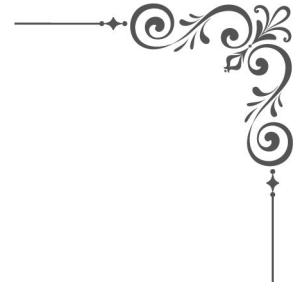
"Like a hand signal?" Celine raised an eyebrow.

"Exactly, or a question only you know the answer to."

Celine pursed her lips, thinking. "How about this?" She wiggled the smallest finger on her left hand, a motion so slight it was unlikely to be noticed by anyone not looking for it.

"Perfect." Alex nodded. He smiled down at her, and Celine's heart jumped in her chest. "You remind me of a girl I used to know." He reached out to touch her hair. "But her hair was much shorter than yours. And her eyes weren't as blue."

"That *was* me." Celine longed to shout the words. Instead, she stepped back, letting his hand fall. Alex let her go, his watchful eyes following as Celine rounded the corner with her guards.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Next day was the knowledge test. Celine was grateful to learn this test would be spectator free. The girls were going to be placed in two separate rooms and asked a series of questions. Knowing there was no way to prepare for this test, Celine went out for a walk in the garden to calm herself. Self-conscious about the trio of guards trailing her, she took the path leading toward the informal section of the royal garden and sat beside the duck pond, watching absently as a family of ducks approached her, hoping for treats.

“Sorry, I have nothing for you.” Celine told the disappointed birds who, after quacking at her feet for a few minutes, left; waddled back to the water. Celine sat on the grass, plucking a blade and twirling it between her fingers.

“There you are.” Gerta approached, another colourful shawl flapping around her shoulders.

Celine felt her guards tense as Gerta approached. “It’s all right, she’s a friend.” She assured them as Gerta sat next to her.

“I see we don’t have to worry about Karl anymore.” Gerta pushed wild waves of hair away from her face.

“That’s right.” Celine plucked another blade of grass, admiring how the light shone through the green.

“I’ve told the rest of the performers who you are.” Gerta’s kind eyes met Celine’s blue ones. “We’re all on your side.”

“How is everyone?” Celine asked. “Did everyone arrive here safely? Is Tommy all right?”

“Every last one of us. Thanks to you and prince Alex. Alex talked to King Ruben, and he’s letting us stay in the shipbuilder’s cottages until we can get on our feet. And he gave Tommy a job in the stable, with Winston.”

“That’s wonderful.” Celine momentarily forgot the stress of the upcoming test. She would make a point of visiting Tommy and Winston later.

“Yes, some of us have already found work.” Gerta’s face filled with pride. Cathal is going to go on one of the trade ships he said he always wanted a chance to get back to the sea. And Brainard is taking a position in the castle, Miranda as well.”

“How about you?” Celine turned to Gerta.

“I’ll be all fine.” Gerta assured her. “I have my gift. Making a living will be easier here without all the opposition. And the cottages are pleasant; much nicer than the tent.”

“Have you been able to—to *see* what’s going to happen?” confidence shattered by her recent defeat, Celine searched Gerta’s eyes, looking for a ray of hope.

Gerta shook her head, a regretful expression crossing in her eyes. “No and believe me, I’ve tried. I only ever see glimpses of things as it is, and your future is cloudy at the minute. If only I *could* see more clearly; I feel so responsible for what that girl has done to everyone.” Gerta clutched her shawl around her shoulder. The family of ducks swam closer, and Gerta reached in her pocket and took out a scone. Breaking it into crumbs, she scattered it over the water. Celine sat silently, watching the delighted ducks scoop and dive at the crumbs.

“I’ll keep trying and let you know as soon as I see anything.” Gerta reassured her as she brushed the crumbs from her hands and stood up. “Come, I’ll walk back to the castle with you.”

Leaving the ducks to their feast, Celine followed Gerta across the smooth lawn.

“It’s an invitation to have dinner with the royal family.” Louise bustled around, laying out a dress. A gauzy concoction of blue, it matched Celine’s eyes perfectly and brought out the gold of her hair.

“I have a hot bath ready for you.” Louise pointed to the steaming tub filled with lavender and rose scented water. Muscles sore from the previous day’s ordeal, Celine sank gratefully into the bath, letting it soak away the tension. When her skin pruned, she wrapped herself in a large fluffy towel and sat at the vanity, letting Louise comb her hair and pin it into a sleek knot on top of her head.

“Sarah sent word that Cherry insisted on wearing corn yellow, even though it’s not your colour, you suit the softer yellows. That’s why we brought you the blue dress. It’s your best colour.” Louise ran a critical eye over Celine as she patted a stray hair into place.

“Thank you.” Grateful for the care the two girls were giving her, Celine grasped Louise’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Well, it’s as much for me as it is you. I can’t stand the thought of that awful creature swanning around this place. She would be as bad as

Penelope.” Louise pulled out a pair of velvet slippers to match the dress.

Celine gathered her wrap and headed for the dining room; hoping this would be one of the more quiet evenings. King Ruben and Queen Abigail had many friends and loved to entertain; the result being that the dining room seemed to have about twenty to fifty guests for any given meal.

Slipping into the room, Celine groaned internally as she saw that once again, Cherry had arrived first. And Sarah was right, the dress wasn’t her colour. Dressed in a puffy dress of lurid yellow, Cherry looked like a seasick dandelion.

Celine slid into her place at the table just as the soup course arrived. Lifting her spoon, she took a sip, letting the creamy flavour rest on her tongue a moment before swallowing.

“Are you ready for the next round?” the gentleman on her left gave her a nudge. Celine remembered him from her diplomatic visit. A member of King Ruben’s council, the elderly man was determined to hold back the hands of time by combing his few wispy bits of white hair across his forehead.

“I believe so, Lord Kareth.” Celine lifted her glass, hoping she had remembered the elderly lord’s name correctly.

“Well, best of luck to you, my dear.” Lord Kareth brought his spoon to his mouth, slurping enthusiastically.

Across the table, Celine felt rather than saw a dark pair of eyes fixed on her. Alex was studying her. When she glanced his way, he took a sip from his cup, wiggling his little finger so slightly it was almost imperceptible. Smiling to herself, Celine raised an eyebrow, letting him know she saw his gesture. She turned back to Lord Kareth, who was asking her another question, a warm glow inside. At least she had someone on her side.

It was time for the test.

Twelve heads turned as Celine entered the room. Posture straight, Celine kept her eyes forward, ignoring Cherry’s smirk as she tried to tamp down the butterflies in her stomach.

King Ruben cleared his throat. “We’ll take you—Princess Celine in the blue—first, and you, Princess Celine in the yellow next.” He gestured toward Celine, letting her know should would be the first to present before the panel.

Celine clenched her hands together, glad to get the ordeal out of the way as soon as possible. She still had no inkling of what questions they intended

to ask—or how many.

Cherry sailed out of the room to the waiting area accompanied by her guards—who she studiously ignored, making it clear she thought she was above them.

King Ruben's aide brought him a thick book. Opening the book, he ran his finger down one of the pages. "Let's begin. We will ask a series of questions, and you can answer them to the best of your ability."

Celine rubbed her sweating palms down her skirt as she waited anxiously for the first question.

"What are the main exports of Lovan?"

"Fruit, grain and cheese." Celine relaxed, letting her shoulders unknot. Well versed in Lovanian trade and politics. She hoped all the questions would be this straightforward.

"Name the past ten Lovanian kings in succession."

"What year was the treaty of Valaria signed?"

"Name the dukes of the ten territories?"

The questions came fast and thick, and Celine's head was spinning. But, aside from a few dates, which had always given her trouble, Celine was confident in her answers. But then the questions veered away from facts.

"What would you do if the southern kingdoms asked for an alliance—but in order to join, you had to give up your position on slavery?"

Celine chewed her lip thoughtfully. The Southern kingdoms had long been proponents of slavery, but their rich trade was attractive and would be a substantial benefit to the smaller kingdom of Lovan. Making her decision, Celine spoke.

"We would keep our position on slavery. Why benefit only a few at the expense of many."

Ruben nodded in response, his expression not giving away how he felt about her answer. "What would you do if a trade route was closed from rockfall?"

"Send the army to unblock the route." Celine answered with confidence. "They're there to help the people, such work should not be beneath them."

After several hours of questioning, Celine was wilting. Finally, after they had exhausted every topic, she was done.

"I think we are finished." King Ruben closed the book. "I will announce the scores after dinner tonight."

Legs numb from hours on the hard wooden chair, Celine stood on shaky legs and left the room, sweeping past Cherry who smirked as she hovered in the hallway waiting for her turn.

Thirty minutes later, Celine sat next to her fire, stretching out her legs and letting the tension seep from her body.

“How did it go?” Sarah had slipped away from her duties while Cherry attended her interview.

“All right—I think.” After yesterday’s events, Celine was hesitant. That knowing look Cherry flashed as she passed her in the hallway made her nerves jangle.

“Do you know if Cherry was planning anything?” Celine asked.

Sarah shook her head. “She’s showed no signs of it, but that doesn’t tell us anything. Cherry knows I’m loyal to you.”

“I’ll just have to wait until they announce the scores to know more.” Celine chewed her lip as she gazed at the fire; wondering if this were to be the end of life as she knew it.

That night at dinner, Cherry was vibrant in a bright green dress. The colour was better than the yellow, but just barely. She laughed often and loudly, the shrill sound grating on Celine’s nerves as she waited anxiously for King Ruben to announce the scores.

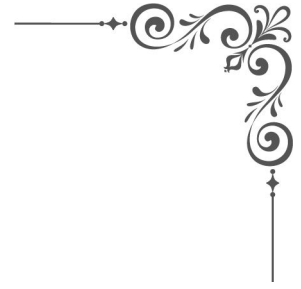
When the pudding was taken away. King Ruben stood, ringing his glass to get everyone’s attention.

Celine hardly dared breathe as she clenched icy hands together, waiting to hear the announcement.

“The winner of the interview round is,” he paused for effect. “The Celine wearing the blue dress.”

A sense of relief washed over Celine. Finally, luck had turned her way. She leaned back, letting her pulse slow and the heaviness lift from her shoulders. Cherry glowering from the other end of the table, not trying to hide her disgruntled expression. Celine caught Alex’s eye, and he smiled encouragingly at her—she felt her pulse flutter in response; glad at least one person in the room knew who she really was. Even though she was *not* here to marry Alex, in fact quite the opposite—she reminded herself sternly. She was here to break off the engagement—to preserve her freedom and independence. She could hardly develop feelings for the Iasian prince now. Celine dragged her eyes away from Alex and turned to converse with her neighbour, the middle-aged wife of a council member who proceeded to

inform Celine in great detail about the activities and dietary habits of her five children.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Celine sat by the window watching the rain chase rivulets down the glass pane. Sleep had not come easily the night before, and her eyes were gritty and sore.

“Here, take this for the cold.” Louise draped a fur-lined cloak around Celine. She snuggled into its softness, letting the warmth comfort her.

“Did you hear from Sarah last night?” Celine couldn’t wait to hear how Cherry had reacted to losing.

“She said Cherry was in a state; she had a tantrum and threw plates.” Louise fussed with the cloak, adjusting it just so over Celine’s shoulders.

“She did? Is Sarah all right?” The thought of Sarah being in danger horrified Celine.

“And when the guards came to see what the commotion was about; Cherry pretended that Sarah was the one who dropped the tray. Of course, they saw they mess and understood what happened. But what can they do?” Louise shrugged.

“Are you sure Sarah’s all right?” Celine felt terrible for sweet, timid Sarah.

“A bit shaken, not hurt. One dish glanced off her, but no actual injuries.”

Celine pressed her lips together tightly. Abusing staff was never acceptable. She would have a word with Sarah later to make sure she was safe.

“Let me know if anything else happens.” Celine instructed Louise, as she took a piece of buttered toast from the breakfast tray and spread it with marmalade.

“I will your highness.” Louise nodded as she poured Celine a cup of her favourite milky spiced tea.

Today’s event again took place in the council chamber. Celine entered, hoping this test would be less arduous than yesterday’s ordeal.

“Good morning.” She smiled graciously at the council members, curtsying to King Ruben and Queen Abigail. Cherry’s pasted-on smile slipped when she saw Celine, but she quickly recovered, simpering at the council members at either side of her.

“For this test, you will go first.” King Ruben gestured toward Cherry. Celine left the room with her guards, who took her to a nearby lounge, a large airy chamber flooded with light in spite of the gloomy weather. Fresh flowers were scattered in large vases, *Queen Abigail’s work no doubt*, thought Celine, sniffing a bowl of roses. She wandered to the refreshment table and helped herself to a cup of sweet hot chocolate and a custard pastry before settling to wait.

Before she could take a single bite of the pastry, Celine was joined by Lord Merek. Helping himself to a large slice of sponge cake; he joined her on a nearby settee.

“Good morning.” Celine would rather have been alone preparing for her upcoming trial, but people came first. Lord Merek was one of King Ruben’s most trusted advisors, and it wouldn’t do to offend him. She stirred her hot chocolate, vaguely wondered why Lord Marek wasn’t participating in the council meeting.

“I see you’re in quite the predicament.” Lord Marek took a forkful of cake, making sure the thick cream didn’t drip on his fine wool breeches.

“It will all be sorted out in time.” Celine kept her expression serene as she sipped the foamy liquid, making sure no foam remained on her upper lip.

The door opened and a serving maid entered, weighed down by a heavy brass bucket of coal for the fire. Stumbling, she tripped on the edge of the rug, overturning the bucket and scattering coal over the richly patterned wool.

“Excuse me.” Celine nodded to Lord Merek and set her plate on a side table so she could help. Picking up the scoop by the fireplace, she assisted the maid in cleaning up the mess; even taking a cloth from the refreshment table to wipe the sooty smudges from the rug.

“Thank you, your highness.” The maid curtsied as she placed the lumps of coal on the fire.

“Of course.” Celine wiped her hands on the cloth. There were smudges on her dress, but it would have to do for now. Hopefully, Louise could wash them out later.

Celine sat back down next to Lord Marek, who was staring at her with a curious expression in his dark eyes. Taking a sip of her now cooling hot chocolate, she smiled politely.

“It’s a shame about the weather.”

“Yes, quite awful really.” Lord Marek stared at the rain still falling from the dark grey clouds.

Presently, an aide came to escort Celine back to the council room. There was no sign of Cherry, she must have left, a fact Celine was grateful for.

King Ruben drew out his parchment, asking Celine a series of questions not dissimilar to the ones from the day before. Celine answered them as best she could, wondering why the two interviews were so similar. Wouldn’t it make sense to combine them? She shrugged off her concern as King Ruben rolled his scroll neatly, tapping it on the table.

“.... the remainder of the event will take place at luncheon.” King Ruben concluded as he stood to leave.

Luncheon was thirty minutes away; Celine followed the king and queen toward the main dining chamber to wait. Queen Abigail was especially fond of mingling before meals; a practice that Celine didn’t love but learned to gracefully participate in out of duty. Accepting a drink from the tray circulating the room, Celine took a sip of the spicy, fruity concoction and concentrated on charming Queen Abigail’s sister, the duchess of Healy who was visiting the royal family from her estate in the north.

“How are Arthur and Anna?” Celine asked solicitously. Arthur and Anna were the childless Duchess’s two spoiled hounds, they accompanied her everywhere. Celine reached down to stroke Arthur’s soft floppy ears, ignoring the drool that covered her hand when he swiped his pink tongue across her hand.

Over the next ten minutes, Celine learned everything about Arthur and Anna—from their health to what time they took their first walk every morning. “In fact, I think Arthur may need a walkies now.” Duchess Healy handed the ornate lead to her waiting attendant, who led the hound toward the French doors.

A bell rang, announcing the time to be seated. Still, there was no hint of the what the rest of the next test would be. Celine wondered what exactly King Ruben and his council planned to do. She pushed her thoughts to the back of her mind as delicious smells filled to room. The soup course, a delicate broth with tiny floating vegetables cut into fanciful shapes, was served. Celine managed to calm her nerves and keep up her end of the conversation as she nibbled the warm crusty bread served with the soup.

After the final course, King Ruben and Queen Abigail departed, smiling and nodding. Lunch was over and Celine *still* had no idea what the test was

going to be.

She sneaked a look at Cherry, who was busy batting her eyelashes at Prince Alex and fussing with her voluminous skirt. Prince Alex caught Celine's eye and winked. Celine relaxed internally, and she returned the cheeky gesture with a wink of her own. *How did he know it was me* she wondered to herself as she wound around a chatting couple; easing her way to the door.

Celine learned from her guards, whom she had gradually worn down with friendliness and sneaking them extra scones from the kitchen, that the results were going to be announced later that evening. However, there was no word on the actual test. Since King Ruben and Queen Isabella had not summoned her to dinner, she would have to wait until morning to find out how she had fared in the latest challenge.

Celine's feet whispered on the carpet as she entered her chamber. Waiting for her in the big chair next to the window was Gerta.

"I hope you don't mind that I let your friend Gerta in. She said it was important" Louise turned her lips down in apology.

"Not at all." Celine assured her, rubbing her neck to ease the tension; Gerta looked anxious, which probably did not bode well for her.

"I had a sighting." Gerta spoke bluntly, not bothering with any pleasantries.

Concerned by the serious tone in Gerta's voice, Celine leaned forward to listen.

"Cherry has the Lovanian sceptre. And she plans to use it against everyone. The only way you can stand against her is to find the sceptre and use it first."

Celine gasped. "How did she get the sceptre?" Celine's sister-in-law, Lucie, could wield the Lovanian sceptre, but Lucie was gifted with magic. Celine hadn't a drop of magic to her knowledge and had barely dared touch the sacred object, although she had seen its power displayed on several occasions.

"Did you see what she is going to do with it?"

Gerta closed her eyes briefly. "I saw—destruction. Cherry's determined to take this crown at any cost; and her power has been fed and grown, even since I've seen her last. You *need* to get it away from her if you have any chance at all."

"Even if I win the competition?"

“Yes, especially if you win the competition. Of course they’ll make the final decision on that when the Lovanians arrive. I’m not sure Cherry realizes that yet. But what I do know is that Cherry’s smarter and more ruthless than I realized. I thought if she was away from Karl, she’d settle down. I was wrong.” Gerta’s face was haggard and drawn.

“Louise? Do you know if you can find out where Cherry keeps the sceptre? If you talk to Sarah, we’ll break in and get it that way if we have to.” Celine pressed her lips together, immediately thinking of the locked trunk. Enough was enough, her family and the Iasian royal family had poured their lives out their citizens, she wasn’t about to let someone snatch that away.

“Yes, your Highness. I’ll speak to Sarah when Cherry goes for her walk. She usually takes one every evening.”

“Thank you for coming Gerta, I know this is hard—you two were close.” Celine leaned forward and touched the woman’s hand.

“Of course, my dear.” Gerta squeezed her hand. “And wear the blue dress at the ball tomorrow. It’s his favourite.” She winked as she drew her colourful shawl around her shoulders and stood to leave.

“Ball?” Celine furrowed her brow, but Gerta had slipped away.

“That must be the grace part of the competition.” Louise clapped her hands in excitement.

Sure enough, that evening, a formal invitation written on the Queen’s distinctive crested stationary slid under the door to Celine’s room.

“Not much notice.” Celine grumbled as she scanned the thick cream card. She enjoyed dressing up; but balls took a lot of time and effort.

Louise spent all afternoon preparing for the ball; the seamstress was in making last-minute adjustments to Celine’s dress—a splendid gown of midnight blue silk.

“It’s really lovely.” Celine was used to having magnificent gowns, but this dress was truly special. She ran a hand down the soft silk, admiring how it shone under the light.

“This colour suits you.” The seamstress spoke through the pins in her mouth as she tucked the fabric around Celine’s frame. “Prince Alex won’t take his eyes off you.”

Celine’s heart gave a thump at the thought of Alex seeing her in this beautiful dress. *You don’t want to marry him.* She reminded herself sternly, struggling to remember why she had been so opposed to the prince in the

first place. If only Queen Abigail had allowed them to get to know each other a little better in the first place, all of this drama could have been avoided.

The next morning Celine woke early to go to the practice arena.

“Don’t get any bruises.” Louise called after her anxiously as she strode down the hallway; followed by her guards.

It felt good to move. Celine hadn’t practiced since Cherry had bested her in the test, and her muscles rejoiced as they flowed through the movements of the routine. Lifting her borrowed sword, she spun across the floor in a blur of motion.

“Mind if I join you?” she nearly dropped her sword.

“Of course not.” Celine grinned at Alex, who wielded his own sword, a shining weapon with gold inlay on the handle.

“Are you sure this is such a good idea?” Alex’s guard stepped forward, disapproval written across his face.

“We’ll be fine.” Alex waved him off.

Taking their places in the middle of the floor, they both got into position. Celine’s guards eyed her warily, preparing to intervene.

Despite Celine’s smaller size, her lightness and speed meant they were evenly matched. Alex got the first point when he distracted her with a feint—one of the oldest tricks in the book. However, she soon rallied and struck back, sending him back several paces.

After a few more minutes of sparring, she won the first round when she flicked the sword out of his hand.

“How did you do that?” he laughed as he picked up the weapon. Side by side they walked to the edge of the arena, much to the relief of Celine’s guards who had looked ready to faint when she had disarmed him.

“Practice. Lots and lots of practice.” Celine laughed, her cheeks flushed with exercise and adrenaline. “I’ve always loved the sword, and my father knew if I kept up with it I could defend myself in danger. Frederick taught me everything he knew, and practising made me feel close to him when he disappeared. Like he was still there with me.”

Alex listened intently as she spoke about her brother. “Were you and Frederick close?”

Celine nodded. “Yes, we understood each other like no one else could. What about you and your brother?”

“We are... but our situation was different, we were only a dukedom. Not so much responsibility.” Alex wiped his face with a cloth and took a drink of water.

“Was it hard to get used to? All this I mean.” Celine waved her hand in the general direction of the castle.

“Very. No one ever expected Penelope to disappear the way she did. I think I’m still getting used to royal responsibilities in a lot of ways. I guess that’s why I spend so much time at the lodge.”

Celine leaned against the railing. “Your mother and father seem to be adjusting well, though. Your mother fits into court like she was born for it.”

“I think I was the one who took royal life the hardest. My mother’s always loved to organize people, so she’s in her element. But I planned to live a quiet existence—not rule an entire kingdom.” Alex paused and cleared his throat, an awkward expression on his face. “I always wanted to tell you.... I’m sorry about what my mother did with the engagement... she didn’t give me any warning that she was going to push us together. I could have reacted a lot better than I did.” His eyes met Celine with a genuine expression of apology.

“It’s all right. I could have behaved better as well.” Celine’s heart warmed as her blue eyes met his brown ones.

“I guess, I wasn’t expecting the alliance announced for me and I didn’t have control over anything anymore. I was pushed into ruling a kingdom, and now a marriage. I know my mother means well; but she can be highhanded.”

“I’ll say.” Celine rolled her eyes in agreement.

“So can we start over? I won’t hold you to any agreements you made with my mother; I’ll handle my Queen Abigail.” Alex held out his hand.

“Starting over sounds good.” Celine held out her hand to take his, wondering why, since she had gotten the freedom she came for, she felt a pang of regret. Alex’s hand was warm and dry, Celine suddenly realized she was holding it much longer than necessary and dropped it like a hot poker. He smiled, then whistling, he put away his practice sword to leave.

“Wait, a minute,” Celine called after Alex. He paused, brushing a strand of dark hair away from his eyes as he waited to hear what she had to say.

“How did you know it was me in here and not Cherry?”

“Easy,” Alex replied, voice light. “Everyone knows you’re the fastest sword around.”

Thoughtfully, Celine put away her own weapon and went back to her room.



“HOLD STILL, I’M NEARLY done.” Louise jabbed another jewelled pin into Celine’s hair. Tonight, she had arranged it into a fall of golden curls that spilled down her back from a braided crown. Celine smoothed her hands down her dress. Usually she didn’t mind getting ready, but the anxious butterflies in her stomach made it hard to sit still. Louise hadn’t managed to learn anything about the sceptre or the locked trunk. Sarah had been kept very busy indeed by her demanding mistress.

They also weren’t yet informed who the winner of the diplomacy award was, and the suspense only increased Celine’s rattling nerves.

“You’re ready.” Louise stood back, surveying her handiwork with a proud expression. Celine had to admit, Louise had done beautiful work. Everything was perfect. She slid her feet into a pair of velvet slippers and settled the matching wrap around her shoulders.

“One more thing.” Louise lifted a small crystal bottle of perfume from the vanity. “Gerta sent this for you. She says it’s special and you have to wear it tonight.” She removed the silver stopper and dabbed several drops onto Celine’s neck and wrists. The heady scent of Jasmine and bergamot swirled in the air. “No one will resist you now.”

A few minutes later, Celine stood at the top of the staircase leading to the main ballroom. Her mother, the elegant Queen Isabella, taught her to always stand in the doorway until people noticed her before entering a room. “It’s important in your station to give your time to people.” Her mother had reminded her when she complained about being constantly stared at.

Heads turned as she rested her hand on the rail and glided down the steps, flicking her dress well out of the way to avoid tripping. At the bottom step, a pair of brown eyes met her blue ones. Alex swallowed hard as his eyes met hers, an almost tangible spark flying between them. He held out his hand, and she took it, his warm skin renewing her confidence.

Courtiers crowded the room, everyone came, hoping to look at the rival princesses, no invitation was turned down. Leading her to a space on the dance floor, Alex spun Celine gracefully into the traditional Iasian ballroom dance. Grateful to her mother for making her learn all the steps, Celine

joined the movements, following his lead as her soft blue skirts swirled around her.

“You look beautiful tonight.” Alex’s voice was a whisper as he raised his arm so she could spin under it.

“Thank you.” Celine smiled. “But I know you have to say that to everyone.”

Alex grinned back. “I do, but I’ve never meant it more than I do now.”

Celine lowered her lashes as her heart skipped a beat. All too soon the dance was over, and as was custom, Alex moved onto another partner. Celine had no lack of suitors. People wanted to be near the phenomenon of the identical princesses. Celine pasted a smile on her face, graciously danced with every partner who asked, although she would have preferred to be by Alex’s side, protected against the curious whispers of the Iasian courtiers.

Across the room, she spotted Cherry, dressed in a bright green gown covered in a strange salmon lace. Celine wondered why the seamstress had not advised her against that particular combination. It did her golden hair and skin no favours, painting them with a sickly pallor. Cherry caught her eyed and glared.

With a start, Celine realized this was it—this was her chance to find the sceptre before Cherry could use it.

Why didn’t she even think of this yet? She scolded herself for the oversight. But she wouldn’t be able to go herself, not under the watchful eyes of her guards. She glanced up to check on them, placed at various points around the edge of the room. They stood ramrod straight; their eyes never leaving her. But.... an idea came to her. Celine casually moved toward the refreshment table, dismissing her current dance partner as she informed him she was in dire need of a cool drink.

Several of the castle servants manned the refreshment table and Celine scanned them carefully, looking for one she recognized. That would be her best hope of getting their message to Louise.

There—a slender girl with dark brown hair and eyes serving the punch. She smiled hesitantly at Celine. Pretending to hover over a tray of pastries, Celine caught the girl’s eye. “Can you sneak away for a moment and ask Louise to come—it’s an emergency. Tell her to meet me at the staircase.” Celine spoke in a low voice to the girl. Responding to Celine’s friendly tone, the girl curtsied.

“Right away, your highness.” She slipped away, and Celine wove her way to the staircase, hoping she didn’t look too obvious to the guards. She waited until the dance started again, then just as a couple moved in front of her, she slipped through the door leading to the corridor. Louise was waiting for her.

“Louise, Cherry’s in here and she’s occupied. Can you find Sarah and go help look for the sceptre?” Celine lowered her voice so the guards that now hovered in the doorway couldn’t hear her.

“You want me to help Sarah with the search?” Louise asked, a pleased expression flitting across her face.

“Yes, but be careful, if Cherry catches wind you’re in her chamber we could all get in a lot of trouble.”

Celine watched Louise hurry off, hoping her absence would go unnoticed by the other party-goers. As she turned, she bumped into Prince Alex, standing in the doorway.

“There you are.” A smile lit up his face. “I’ve been looking for you. I’ve finished my duty dances, so I was wondering if you would do me the honour.” He held out his hand.

The butterflies in Celine’s heart fluttered at the knowledge that Prince Alex had sought her out. “How did you know it was me this time? We didn’t use the signal.”

They arrived on the dance floor, sliding into position between the duke of Chessington and Lady Shillerhill.

“You might have the same features; but everything else about you is completely different.” Prince Alex dipped Celine toward the floor, one hand securely behind her back. “You’re kind and the fact that you truly care about your people shows.”

Celine warmed at the compliment, knowing it was not earned lightly. She put one hand around his shoulders, leaning in more than was strictly necessary as they swayed across the floor.

“I think I’m not the only one who’s noticed.” Alex nodded toward King Ruben and Queen Abigail, who were looking their way. “Mother and father noticed the difference as well. One more test and there will be no doubt about it.”

“What are we doing for the last test, I’m still confused about the last one?” Celine was nervous about what mysterious trial she would have to face next.

“I don’t know. My mother is organizing this one, and she’s being even more devious than usual about it,” Alex admitted.

Celine worried her lip, wondering if Cherry had any tricks up her sleeve for the next trial.

“Do you know when they’re going to announce the results of the last test?”

Alex shook his head. I was in the council meeting when they discussed it and they’ve decided to wait until the end and make one big announcement. His eyes softened as he took in Celine’s anxious expression. “Don’t worry, he stroked her forearm with his warm fingers. The truth will come out in the end.”

Celine smiled, hiding her fears under forced cheer. “I’ll look forward to when it’s all over then.” She curtsied as another partner, an Earl, cut in taking her hand. Alex reluctantly let Celine hand slide away, his eyes never leaving her as she glided away.

At long last the ball came ended, and to Celine’s disappointment, the results of the trial were still not announced. Exhausted, Celine climbed into bed and blew out her candle. Louise had not made an appearance that evening, which was unusual for her. She was nearly always waiting with hot chocolate at bedtime. So loyal she even slept in the dressing room cot in case she was needed during the night.

Tired as Celine was, sleep did not come easy that night, the bed was strangely lumpy. Although Celine was fatigued from the late hour and tensions of the trials, she tossed and turned restlessly. Eventually, when grey smudges of light peeked around the edge of the curtains announced dawn had arrived, Celine decided to forgo sleep. She threw a warm blanket around her shoulders and went to sit by the window. An hour later Louise was still missing, Celine had to start the fire herself, fanning the embers until the flames blazed up; warming the room with heat.

Dropping the coal bucket, Celine rubbed her lower spine. Whatever was in her bed to make it so uncomfortable had left her sore and tender. She wondered if she should let the housekeeper know—after all other guests stayed there as well and it wouldn’t do to have them uncomfortable. After the room warmed, she dressed herself, lacing her gown up as best she could and opened the door, startling the guard.

“Harry, have you seen Louise anywhere?” Celine asked the guard, who was still blinking in surprise to see her awake at such an early hour. She

pulled the blanket tight around herself, ignoring his reddening cheeks.

“No, your highness, but I only changed shifts two hours ago.” A concerned expression crossed the guards face. He knew Louise was too loyal to leave Celine’s side for long.

“Could you send someone to go look for her? She never came in last night, and I want to make sure she’s all right.”

“I’ll go, I’m due the shift change soon,” Harry offered.

Celine nodded and went back into her chamber to wait. The sun was soon blazing high in the cloudless sky and still Louise hadn’t appeared. Now truly concerned, Celine went to look for Louise herself. Limping from the pain in her back, she headed toward the kitchens, guards trailing closely behind her.

The castle kitchens were busy—it was the breakfast hour and trays were being prepared for all the rooms as well as for the service in the breakfast room. The smell of bacon and toast drifting through the air made Celine’s stomach growl, but she tamped down the hunger, her concern for the missing girl forefront in her mind. Not wanting to interrupt their work, Celine waited until she saw one of the maid’s bringing a tray back from one of the staterooms.

“Have you seen Louise anywhere?” she asked the girl, so startled at being approached by the princess she nearly dropped her tray.

“No, wasn’t she with you last night?” a wrinkle formed between the girl’s eyes.

“No.” Celine shook her head. “I spoke to her at the ball, but I haven’t seen her since.”

Celine wished she had never sent Louise poking around Cherry’s room. Who knows what sorts of things Cherry was storing in that chest.

After asking a few more people and not receiving any answers, the knot in Celine’s stomach a thick knot of worry twisted in her stomach. Celine enlisted the help of her guards, who were more than willing to help in the search for the missing girl.

Over an hour later, Celine arrived back in her chamber, where a familiar piece of stationery waited for her under the chamber door.

“Audience at 10 am?” Celine read the card. She quickly pinned her hair with clumsy fingers, realizing she had little time and no one to help her dress. There wasn’t much she could do about the dark circles hanging under

her eyes; but Celine pinched a bit of colour into her cheeks and dashed cold water on her eyes to remove the puffiness.

“This way, we’re going to the king’s private chambers for this audience.” King Ruben’s steward met Celine at the door.

Celine widened her blue eyes in surprise. Even on her diplomacy visit, King Ruben and Queen Abigail hadn’t invited her to the private apartments—their sanctuary from court. She followed the steward down the hall toward the private wing. Cherry had already arrived and was sitting stiffly in a high-backed chair. Celine took a seat, glancing around with curious eyes. Although stately, it was clear this private chamber was a personal space with family paintings on the walls and sentimental knickknacks scattered about. The queen’s little companion dog lay on a cushion near the fire, its paws twitching in its sleep.

Queen Abigail sent for refreshments, and hungry from her missed breakfast, Celine was glad to see sweet rolls, sticky with honey, were still warm from the oven. She took a cup of tea and added a milk and three generous lumps of sugar.

“How did you sleep?” an intense look of curiosity flashed across the queen’s face before she quickly covered it with a polite smile.

“Wonderful.” Cherry gushed, leaning forward with enthusiasm. “I think your bed is more comfortable than my own.” She giggled; an annoying sound that grated on Celine’s tired nerves.

“And you?” the queen turned to Celine, waiting for an answer.

“I’m afraid I had too much on my mind to sleep well, Your Majesty.” Celine disliked lying, but she also didn’t feel it would be diplomatic to complain about the lumpy mattress. Either way, she wouldn’t be in it very much longer.

“Oh, dear.” The queen’s face took on a look of concern. “I hope there wasn’t anything wrong with the bed.”

“I’m afraid that something might have gotten caught under the mattress. No matter, I can have Louise check under it when I return.” Celine sipped her tea, hoping she hadn’t crossed the boundaries of politeness. This was not a good time to offend.

“Of course.” The queen’s eyes gleamed.

King Ruben cleared his throat. “Well, I’m sure you girls are wondering why we brought you here instead of to the council chambers.” he began.

“The truth of the matter is that the final and most important test took place last night.”

“You mean there’s only four tests?” Cherry’s eyes filled with confusion.

“No, the ball was the test of grace; but there was another test after that one.”

Celine squeezed her hands together in her lap, waiting to hear what King Ruben had to say.

“It was this.” He raised his hand. Between his thumb and his forefinger was a small green ball; about the size of a marble. “I know this stone looks like a pea. But this is magic. It has been warded with the ability to feel out the true nature of a person’s heart.”

Queen Abigail took over. “While you were at the ball, one of these warded stone was placed in each of your beds. The girl who could feel the stone is the true princess. Celine, that lump in your mattress—was this. You are the true princess.” She turned to Celine with a gentle smile on her lips.

Cherry’s mouth gaped in shock as an ugly expression marred her features. She stood up, huffing in protest. The king’s guards, who had been standing at the edge of the room, were too quick for Cherry. Before she could move, they secured her by the arms.

“Be careful.” Celine warned, “She can change form—and she’s good at it.”

“Don’t worry.” The king assured her. “They’re using copper. It will dull her magic so she won’t be able to use her abilities.”

Cherry twisted and struggled, shrieking in protest. But the guards soon had two copper bracelets clamped around her wrists. “Take her to the most secure cell.” King Ruben ordered, “She’s dangerous and trickier than you might think.”

“We have a room lined with a layer of copper. We use it for mages, and I had it strengthened after what happened with Penelope.” King Ruben explained to Celine. “She won’t be able to do anything once she’s in there.”

“I’m so sorry about everything you had to go through.” Queen Abigail’s eyes filled with sympathy. “But we couldn’t take the chance of getting the wrong person. We designed the first trial to give you the advantage right away. Everyone knows your skills with the sword. She had us fooled until one of our mages warned us about magic used in the first trial, so we had to go through with the rest of the trials. After that she showed her hand; but we

needed ultimate confirmation. I'm so sorry you had to go through that ordeal. I'm sure it was terrible." She put a warm hand on Celine's shoulder.

Tears of relief stung Celine's eyes, her nightmare was over; Cherry was gone. Her shoulders relaxed and for the first time since Cherry had taken over her life, she realized she could be herself again.

"Also...." Queen Abigail broke in. "We have decided—King Ruben and I." her eyes flicked to King Ruben who nodded in support. "That we will not hold you to the engagement. It wasn't fair or right to push you into it. I was overexcited, you were so lovely and perfect, and the alliance would have been wonderful. But it wasn't the right thing to do." She held out her hand in apology.

A shiver of disappointment ran through Celine. She had become fond—more than fond if she were honest—of Alex over the past week and the thought of never seeing him again sent a pang of sadness shooting through her. "Thank you." She managed a smile as she forced the words out.

"And of course you are free to go back to Lovan whenever you wish. I will send a contingent of guards to go with you." King Ruben's face was solemn. "We only wish for good relations between the two kingdoms. Of course if King Erich is open to the idea we would still welcome a strategic alliance. But we will go through other, more appropriate channels."

"I appreciate your offer." Celine couldn't help feeling that she was being dismissed. A door behind Queen Abigail opened, Alex came in, seating himself on a settee next to his father. His eyes slid to Celine's, a smile lighting up his handsome features. "Didn't I tell you all along, Father?"

"Yes, yes, you did. I should have listened." King Ruben's eyes twinkled at his son's teasing voice.

A commotion rumbled outside the door, jerking them from the conversation. Alex ran to the door, eyes alert. A guard met him, rushing in and locked the door behind him, panting heavily from exertion.

"What's happening?" Queen Abigail's brow furrowed in concern.

"It's the false princess, Your Majesty. She's turned into an ogre and attacked the guards as they were putting her in the cell."

"But, how did she do it? The cuffs should have prevented that." King Ruben quickly closed the open windows, locking them securely.

"She somehow accessed her magic just long enough to get her wrists to slide through them. She must have known it was her only chance. Once she

was in that cell, she could never have used it.”

“Do you know which way she went?” Alex paced up and down the room.

“I think toward the guest wing.”

“The sceptre.” Celine gasped. Everyone turned their attention to her, waiting for an explanation.

“Cherry sneaked the sceptre out of Lovan and brought it here with her. She must plan to use it. I sent Louise to look for it last night and she never came back—that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” Celine blinked the moisture out of her eyes.

King Ruben and Queen Abigail exchanged concerned looks.

“Is there a way to get into Cherry’s room unnoticed?” Celine asked.

“The girls thought she was keeping the sceptre in a locked trunk. If there’s a tunnel, we could sneak into her room.”

King Ruben shook his head. “Unfortunately, when Penelope left, she took those secrets with her. We’ve found a few tunnels, but nothing leading the direction of the guest wing.”

“What is it do you think Cherry wants?” Queen Abigail turned to Celine. “Do you have any idea? Maybe if we made her an offer...”

“She wants everything... the prince, the crown, and the kingdom.” The noise in the hall grew louder, shouts of men growing closer. They were almost at the chamber door. There was a clash of swords, then sudden silence, eerie after the chaos.

“Where did she go?” a guard shouted.

A scurrying and scratching at the door caught her ear. A small field mouse, with a brown coat shiny and bright eyes, scampered under the door. Queen Abigail forgot her dignity and lifted her feet from the floor with a squeal.

The mouse ran to the middle of the floor and blinked up at them. Then it began to grow, stretching and oozing into the shape of a woman. But this woman was not the now familiar form of Celine, or of the girl she had known as Cherry. This woman was much older. She stood tall, magnificent black hair waving around a beautiful face with cold blue eyes. One hand gripped an jewelled sceptre, the unmistakable Lovanian crest carved into its side.

“You.” The woman pointed at Celine, eyes blazing with anger. “You ruined everything. Do you realize how long it took us to plan this?” She

raised the sceptre. The end of it sparked and hissed, lighting up the room with a fierce glow.

Celine sat frozen in her seat. Her fingers itched for a sword as her eyes slid around the chamber, hoping to spot something she could use as a weapon. Then she saw it, hung over the fireplace, an old-fashioned long sword, an antique. It would have to do. She averted her eyes so the woman wouldn't know what she was planning.

"Us?" she said, attempting to distract the woman long enough to grab the weapon.

"Yes, us." The woman sneered, an ugly expression marring her beautiful features. "It's been too long since magic has reined free in Lovan, and now that it is, the people are ruining it with their judgmental attitudes. We've been planning this for years. We knew when the sceptre re-appeared that was our chance." She waved the object, sending sparks shooting across the room. Queen Abigail's little dog whimpered, cowering under the settee.

"But, what did you want?" Celine eyed the woman carefully. If she just took one step to the left, she could dash past her. "We changed the law and lifted the ban on magic. We can't change people's minds that quickly. What else did you want us to do?"

The woman paused, a surprised expression flitting across her face as she lowered the sceptre an inch. "Well, you could make it a crime for people to hurt us for a start."

"But we did do that. I don't how else the royal family can convince people that magic isn't wrong, these things take time." Celine protested.

Cherry lowered her eyebrows as she raised the sceptre again, poised to strike. Celine shrank back, realizing she had lost ground. "What do you suggest we do?" she quickly tried to recover and regain the rapport.

The woman pouted like a small child. "Do you know what it's like for people to hate you, fear you, wherever you go? For them to whisk their children inside and shut their doors in your face? No, of course you don't. You're the favourite child of the king. Everyone adores you everywhere you go. Even when I looked just like you, you were *still* the favourite." Bitterness filled her eyes as she glared at Celine.

"All I wanted was to be like everyone else. But if I can't have that, I'll do this instead." She raised the sceptre over her head, sending showers of multicoloured lights scattering across the chamber. A strange tingling sensation swept across Celine. With a jolt of alarm she realised she couldn't

move. Even her eyelids froze in place and her very blood seemed to slow in her veins. Across the chamber, Alex and the king and queen were likewise locked in position, a look of horror carved into Queen Abigail's face.

Cherry closed her eyes, muttering terrible sounding words in a strange ancient tongue. Power poured out of the sceptre, flooding the room with magic. She realized this was the end and her heart filled with regret as she thought of the family she would never see again, her parents, brother Lucie, and Alex. Across the room, his tall figure was a block of ice. Celine wondered wretchedly what would have happened had they gotten acquainted without the meddling of Queen Abigail and Cherry. It was with a stab of regret that she realised she would never know.

Suddenly, the power stopped, cut off at the source. The thick syrupy air was still tinged with magic, but even that was changing as a light, fresh breeze raced through the room, ruffling Celine's hair and the corner of her dress. Celine heard footsteps, someone was behind her, but she couldn't move enough to turn around.

"Not so fast." said a feminine voice behind her. The rays of light flashing from the sceptre faded to a dull shine. The owner of the voice stepped into her line of sight. Lucie, hand outstretched and eyes focused in concentration on the sceptre.

Cherry's face paled as she realized her weapon no longer obeyed her and her hand shook. The sceptre slid from her fingers and floated across the room to rest in Lucie's waiting hand.

"Enough." Lucie commanded; her voice quiet but firm. The magic disappeared, visibly disappearing back into the sceptre.

Celine limbs filled with pins and needles, her body resp. A snarl of anger emerged from Cherry's mouth when she realized her most powerful weapon was no longer at her disposal. Leaping forward, she wrapped her hands around Lucie's neck. Celine acted quickly. In two steps, she reached the fireplace and grabbed the sword. Spinning in one liquid movement, she held the point to the back of Cherry's neck, just enough to prick the surface of the skin.

Cherry released Lucie a fell back, and Alex and King Ruben sprang into action, twisting her hands behind her back.

"We need copper. Now." Alex shouted to the guards who had come rushing in.

“Here.” said Lucie, “this will work.” She spoke a few words gently to the sceptre and a faint rush of air, streaked with purple, whisked past Celine and twisted round Cherry, binding her hands together.

One of King Ruben’s guards brought the bracelet and tightened it around Cherry’s wrists; this time making sure there was not even a sliver of space remaining between the metal and her skin.

“I’ll go with the guards to make sure she doesn’t escape; then we’ll talk.” Taking the sceptre with her, Lucie accompanied the guards as they took Cherry back to the cell.

Celine sank back into her seat as the door closed behind them. Her head was still spinning from the close call. “Are you all right?” Alex sat next to her, and she basked in his comforting warmth and the clean smell of sandalwood that accompanied him. His brown eyes scanned her for injuries.

“I’m all right.” Celine took a shaky breath. She realized she was still holding the heavy ceremonial sword and set it carefully down at her feet, wiping her hands on her dress.

“Your Majesty, may I announce the Crown Prince Frederich and Princess Lucie.” The steward appeared at the door, bowing deep as he ushered Frederich and Lucie into the room.

“Frederich? How did you arrive so soon?” Squealing with delight, Celine embraced her brother enthusiastically.

“We left not long after Cherry. Father and mother didn’t argue too much. I think they suspected something was up, Cherry was acting so strangely. Not like you at all—so when we left, we travelled as quickly as possible. We were so worried about what mischief she might be planning. And it looks like we left just in time.” Frederich finished his sentence grimly. “We suspected Cherry had the sceptre with her when Lucie couldn’t find in her office.”

“Lord Remy gave the sceptre to her. He’s not as much of an ally as we thought he was.” Celine quickly filled Lucie and Frederich in on Lord Remy’s unsavoury activities.

“I wondered why Lord Remy mysteriously disappeared when Cherry left. He told everyone he was going back to his estate for business. I actually was going to ask him if he’d seen the sceptre anywhere.”

“Is that where you think Lord Remy is now? His estate?” Celine asked. “We have to track him down before he retaliates.”

Alex shot a concerned look toward Celine. “Couldn’t you leave that to your father’s men? You’ve done enough.” his brow furrowed in concern.

Frederich laughed. “Celine? Leave the action to someone else? Not a chance” He threw his sister a wink.

“Be careful.” King Ruben spoke. “Lord Ruben is obviously extremely dangerous. Who knows what kind of power he has amassed. When we find him, it’s important to strike fast. Without warning.”

The younger members of the group pondered this advice; Celine, Lucie and Frederich mourning the loss of the man they had known of as a close friend and one of King Erich’s closest allies.

“Does Lord Remy have any idea that we know its him?” Lucie asked.

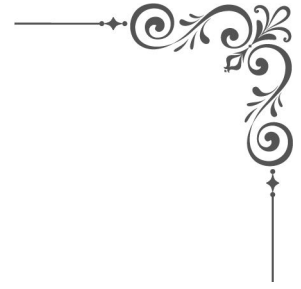
“I doubt it. I just hope that he’s gotten away with it long enough to become careless.” Queen Abigail spoke up, stroking the soft fur of the little dog that had jumped in her lap to look for comfort.

“Do you know where Lord Remy’s estate is located?” Alex turned to Celine and Frederich.

“It’s North, nowhere near the capital. Lord Remy owned a house in the city he used most of his time in the capital.” Although Celine had never visited Lord Remy’s estate, she knew he possessed vast acreage, not to mention extensive mines and other holdings in the mountain ranges to the north.

“The north is so far, I wish there was a quick way to get there. Who knows what means Lord Remy has of sending and receiving messages. If only we still had that magic mirror.” Frederich tapped his fingers together as he thought.

“I have an idea.” Celine spoke up, a sly smile crossing her face.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I still think you’re crazy, and I still can’t believe it was you in my lodge.” Alex turned to Celine, who was riding behind him. It had only taken a few hours for Alex, Celine, Frederick and Lucie to gather provisions and mount the sturdiest of King Ruben’s horses before heading for the mountains. On the way, Lucie and Frederick had filled Alex in on Celine’s misadventure with Cherry.

“Are you sure you know the way, Celine?” Lucie chewed her lip, as her horse picked across a rocky patch of ground.

“I think so.” Trying to get her bearings and steer the small group in the right direction; Celine was quickly discovering the terrain looked distinctively different on the ground than it did from the sky.

“And who’s saying they’ll help us when we find their lair?” Frederick spoke from his position at the rear of the group.

“Of course they’ll help us. I saved their egg; they owe me now.” Celine narrowed her eyes, focusing on the trail ahead. Ahead, she spotted a familiar mountain peak. “We have to get to that mountain.” She pointed to the summit.

“Blackdruod Peak.” breathed Alex. “Are you sure about this?” he turned questioning eyes to Celine.

“Yes.” Celine turned her horse uphill. “It’s our only chance.”

After an entire day snaking around giant boulders and through towering pine trees, Celine’s energy was flagging. When they stopped to make camp for the night, the mountain towered over them, so high it blocked the setting sun.

Exhausted, the group only took enough time to wolf down a quick dinner of cold meat and bread before collapsing into their bedrolls. Everyone fell asleep immediately, except Celine, who stared at the fire, sparking from the sap of the pine wood.

“Are you awake?” Alex whispered from his place nearby.

“I can’t stop thinking about the magic.” Celine sat up, hugging her knees to her chest. “I don’t understand why it has to cause so much destruction.”

“The magic?” Alex asked.

“Yes.” Celine fingered a silky strand of hair spilling over her shoulder. “Everyone seems to either be willing to do anything to get magic, or is so terrified they refuse to tolerate anything any magic at all.”

“Not everyone.” Alex glanced at Lucie, who murmured and turned over in her sleep.

“I suppose.” Celine studied her sister-in-law thoughtfully. Lucie had only come to terms with her magic after a long struggle and was the first person in Lovan to embrace her abilities.

“There are all kinds of people in this world.” Alex continued, turning his attention from the fire to Celine. “Magic is like any other quality, who you are inside comes out no matter what ability you have. Lovan needs time—old habits die hard. If you keep doing what you’re doing, people will come around.”

Celine bit her lip. She didn’t like to admit it—even to herself, but Lord Remy’s betrayal had shaken her to the core.

“You know, we’ll always help you however we can. I know my mother can be overbearing.” His lips twisted wryly. “but she has a good heart, and she truly cares about the people. And I’ll help you if you ever need anything. Anything at all.” He whispered the last few words.

Celine nodded, lying back on her bedroll. Although nothing had changed, Alex’s support made her feel better.

The next morning was chilly. They shivered in their cloaks and the horses breathed frosty puffs of air as they picked their way up the steep slope to the dragon’s lair. Celine scanned the area for familiar landmarks, but the sparse landscape all looked the same, dull grey rocks looming like jagged teeth reaching for the sky. As they steadily approached Blackdruid’s peak. Celine planned what she would say to the dragons when they reached their lair. However, she was saved the bother when, in a rush of hot air and flapping of leathery wings, a dragon swooped down and landed in front of her.

“I thought we delivered you to the Iasian’s castle.” Hot smoke came out the dragon’s mouth as she spoke.

“Hello, Mildred.” Celine recognized the raspy voice. She held back, knowing the jittery horse would bolt if she drew closer.

“Hello my dear. I see you’ve brought guests.” Mildred eyed the visitors with a disapproving expression.

“Mildred, this is my brother Frederick, my sister-in-law Lucie, and Prince Alex.” Celine made the introductions as if she were at a formal tea.

“Lovely to meet you all.” Mildred stretched her dragon claws into a clumsy bow.

“Mildred, we were hoping you could help us.” Celine spoke quickly. She could see the dragon was getting bored and restless.

“But I did help you. I brought you back to your people.” Mildred polished a razor sharp claw on a sharp rock.

“I know, and I’m more than grateful. But I was hoping you could just do one more teeny tiny thing. It’s about the man who stole your egg.” She hoped this fact would be enough to sway the indifferent dragon.

Mildred’s head swung up in interest. “Who would that be?” her eyed glittered.

“His name’s Lord Remy, one of my father’s advisors from the Lovanian court. He hired Karl to take your egg.” Mildred huffed a breath of sulfur smoke, causing the horses to start back.

“He’s stealing people’s power and using them for himself. I was hoping you could fly us to his estate before he has time to run and escape.”

“Just wait until I get my claws in him.” The scales on Mildred’s back ruffled up. “Wait here, humans, I’ll be back in a moment.” Mildred sprang up, wheeling in mid-air and heading for the peak.

Less than a few minutes later she was back, this time accompanied by Hugo. “We left Quinn with the egg. We’re not taking any chances leaving it again. Whoever’s coming hop on. One human per dragon please. She lowered herself, scaly elbows resting on the ground.”

The four exchanged glances as they realized that only two of them could go. “You should stay.” Celine addressed Frederick and Lucie. “We can’t both go, and if something happens, Lovan needs you—the baby needs you. And you too, Frederick. After all, I got us into this mess, I want to be the one who gets us out of it.”

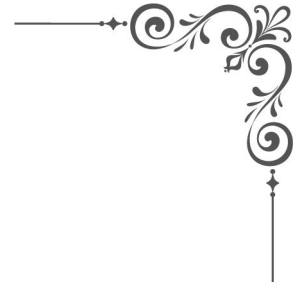
“No, I’m coming with you.” Alex stepped forward, giving Frederick a challenging look before he could argue. Lucie stepped forward to give Celine a hug. “Are you sure?” she whispered. “You know your father can take care of Remy.”

“Ahem.” Mildred coughed politely. “If you’re finished with your little discussion over there; we should probably get going.”

Celine let go of Lucie; who returned to her spot under Frederick's sheltering arm. Stepping forward, she scrambled up Mildred's side, wincing slightly when her skin scraped against the hot rough scales. Alex did the same with Hugo.

"Wait." Lucie ran to Celine, holding out the gleaming sceptre. "Take this. Maybe it can protect you." Celine leaned down over Mildred's side and took the heavy metal in her hand, its weight reminding her of the importance of her undertaking.

With a rush of air, and a flap of her wings, Mildred leapt into the air. They were away.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Icy wind whistled through Celine's hair as they sped through the air. The rocky slopes gave way to the deep green of the forest beneath her. Mildred and Hugo had flown high enough to remain unnoticed, and Celine's head spun as she braved another glance at the ground rushing below her. Hugo and Alex were behind her, and although she didn't dare turn around, she could hear the steady flap of Hugo's wings as he powered across the sky.

"Shouldn't be long now." Mildred called back, her voice cheerful. The deep green trees grew in tidy rows of orchards interspersed with golden fields of wheat. Celine hadn't realized how extensive Lord Remy's holdings really were. He had lived modestly while in the capital, splurging only on the magical artifacts that were his obsession.

The spires of Lord Remy's castle appeared in the distance. Located on the rise of a hill, a small lake sparkled next to it, with few colorful boats bobbing in the water.

"Where do you want to get off?" Mildred turned her colossal head as she swept toward the ground, circling the lake. In spite of the vast farmland and well-kept grounds, there were no signs of life, no animals grazing in the pastures, no people working the fields and gardens. An eerie chill trickled down her spine; something about this place felt... *wrong*.

"Can we land there beside the lake?" Celine was unfamiliar with the layout of Lord Remy's holdings and she didn't actually have a plan for what was going to happen next; but the back entrance seemed like the best place to start.

Mildred skimmed across the surface of the lake, landing on a smooth green patch of grass near the castle. Celine scrambled down, politely hiding her relief when she felt the solid ground back under her feet. Alex was close behind her, his hair ruffled from the wind.

"Do you think Lord Remy's actually here?" Alex asked, as he eyed the looming spires of Lord Remy's castle.

"There's only one way to find out." Celine climbed up the hill toward the castle.

The large wooden gate creaked open when Celine gave it a gentle push. They still had encountered no one yet. The castle was eerily silent; even the trees were silent, no birds twittered and called from the sky, and no chattering squirrels scampered up and down their branches.

Celine stuck her head around the edge of the door to the courtyard. The guardhouse was empty. They slipped through the door and it banged shut behind them, sending a deafening clang through the silence.

“Where will we look first?” Alex turned to Celine, raising an eyebrow. The castle walls loomed in front of them, full of endless possibilities for places to hide.

“I guess just start at the beginning.” Celine strode across the courtyard with confidence than she felt and pulled the handle of what she assumed was the kitchen door. It opened without resistance.

“I guess Lord Remy doesn’t see the need to lock up.” Alex commented, a wry expression on his face.

They entered a large service room, surprisingly clean considering the lack of staff, Celine peered through the gloom, not sure what she was searching for. Ignoring the large staircase spiralling in front of her, she moved toward the back of a short hall toward a set of double doors that stood open. Alex followed, letting her lead the way.

Hours later, Celine was ready to give up. They had wandered from room to room, all spotless and decorated with perfect taste and priceless objects. It surprised Celine. She always thought of Lord Remy as a frugal and parsimonious man—not at all interested in fripperies. She paused briefly to examine a large painting of a bygone king seated on a throne. It was the frame that caught her eye first, ornate, heavy and gold.

“Alex, look at this.” She gestured to the painting. Alex came over, peering at the canvas.

“What is it?”

“It’s the sceptre.” She pointed to the object in the king’s hand.

“Do you know who that is in the painting?” Alex stood close behind Celine, so close her cheek brushed against his tunic, temporarily distracting her.

“No; he doesn’t look familiar at all.” Celine jerked her attention back to the painting, examining the king’s face. He had a proud, fierce expression, and although his eyes were merely oil on canvas, they seemed to see right through them, making Celine squirm uncomfortably.

“The king actually looks a lot like Lord Remy. Just less... chubby.” Shrugging, she moved on. The next door was different. Celine knew immediately by the tingle that ran up her hand. She opened it cautiously. It led into a large chamber that was unlike anything else in the castle.

Celine sneezed; the room was full of dust. Strangely, this chamber had not benefited from the rigorous cleaning the rest of the castle enjoyed. Heavy wooden shelves lined the entire chamber from floor to ceiling, overflowing with strange looking objects.

“This must be Lord Remy’s collection.” Celine stood in the middle of the chamber with an awestruck expression. She wandered toward a row of bottles on a shelf. The bottles were clear, about the size of Celine’s hand. Inside the bottle appeared to be some sort of liquid that swirled in intricate patterns, almost glowing as it caught the light streaming through the window. Mesmerized, Celine reached to touch a silvery grey bottle.

“Stop.” Alex grabbed her hand, stopping her before Celine touched the glass. “In case there’s anything dangerous, we shouldn’t go near anything in this chamber.”

Celine hastily stepped back from the shelves, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “What do you think those are?” her eyes strayed to the gleaming bottles.

“I’m not sure, but there’s dark magic at work in here. We have to be very, very careful.”

Celine wondered what she was getting into. The sceptre she had tucked into her belt was growing warm, responding to the thick, oily magic eddying through the chamber. She touched the sceptre with one finger before jerking it back. It was hot enough to be uncomfortable to the touch and sent an uncomfortable tingle stinging through her fingers.

“Maybe we should go.”

Alex nodded in response, and the pair left the room. Celine took a deep breath as soon as she closed the door behind her.

“I’ve never seen or felt anything like that before, except maybe once.” Celine grimaced remembering Karl’s medallion as they continued down the corridor, arriving at a staircase winding up a lofty tower.

“Will we try this? I think we’ve seen everything on the main floors.” Gripping the railing tight as the stairs were steep, Celine ascended. It was dark, only the light from thin windows cut into the hewn rock lit the uneven

staircase. A small landing, just big enough for two people, was at the top of the stairs. Behind the landing was an ancient looking wooden door.

When Celine grasped the handle, a shock shot through her body, electric in its intensity. "He's in here," she whispered to Alex.

Hoping for an element of surprise, she flung the door open with a shout.

"Hello my dear." It was Lord Remy, sitting in an overstuffed armchair. In one hand he held a steaming cup of milky sweet tea and in the other he balanced plate holding a teetering slice of ginger cake.

"Well, don't just stand there; sit down. Have some tea; we can enjoy a little chat." He chided Celine who stood, mouth gaping, not quite sure what to make of this turn of events. She wanted to find Lord Remy. But she hadn't expected him to act so... normal.

Numb, Celine moved to a matching chair. It was soft, she thought, rubbing the velvet surface. Her brain felt fuzzy, and she wondered why she was in this strange room.

"Cream and sugar?" Lord Remy lifted his pinky finger as he poured tea into a gold-rimmed cup. He slid a slice of the ginger cake to another plate. "What about your friend? Will he be staying?" Lord Remy asked in a kind voice.

"Uh, yes, I think so." Celine looked helplessly at Alex. *Why is he here?* She wondered, idly accepting the cup Lord Remy offered her.

"Now. We're all settled." Lord Remy leaned back comfortably in his chair, picking up his plate and taking a bite. He closed his eyes in bliss.

Celine swirled the tea in her cup. She had a vague feeling she shouldn't drink it, but she didn't know why. She set the cup down, hoping she didn't appear rude. Lord Remy was such a nice man, it would be awful to offend him. Her sky blue eyes met his twinkling ones.

"Now, how are you my dear?" Lord Remy pushed up his gold-rimmed spectacles, his face crinkling into smiles.

"I'm well," Celine answered, politely. "How are you?" She racked her brain as her mouth stretched into a vague smile. *There must be a reason to be in this chamber*, she thought, picking up the tea again. What a beautiful cup, Lord Remy was so hospitable.

"And who's your friend?" Lord Remy leaned forward to help himself to another generous slice of cake, scattering crumbs across the silver tray.

"This is Alex." A feeling of surprise nudged Celine. She had completely forgotten about Alex. She wondered absently why Alex was there with her,

wasn't he supposed to be in Iasia?

"Excellent. I've heard so many things about you; and your many.... talents." Lord Remy grinned at Alex, who remained standing stiffly near Celine's chair. "You must give me a demonstration later."

Celine leaned back, looking at Alex. "Talents?"

"Oh, yes." Lord Remy's eyes twinkled cheerfully as he dug his fork into the cake. "Alex has a very unusual gift. I really am quite eager to see it."

Alex pressed his lips together as he took a protective step toward to Celine, hovering directly behind her chair. Celine felt his warm breath stir her hair as Alex laid a hand on her shoulder. As soon as he touched her, Celine's mind cleared. *We're here because Lord Remy is a dangerous man.* She shivered as she realized how easily Lord Remy had manipulated her. Carefully holding the vapid expression, Celine formulated a plan. She would have to move fast, Lord Remy was cunning—more cunning than she imagined, and who knows what kinds of unpleasant skills he might have at his disposal.

"You have a magnificent home." Celine had found in the past that flattery was a most useful tool when buying time. "You must tell me all about it. Have you made any changes yourself or did you inherit it like this?"

"Oh, I've made additions here and there." Lord Remy preened, delighted at the chance to show off his accomplishments. "I've had a whole new section added to the garden. Mostly useful plants—for my studies, of course. Althea was invaluable in showing me what to plant. And I've also added some security features. My predecessors were a bit... lax when it came to safety."

"Of course." Celine nodded wisely. "One must think of safety. And I can't help but notice that you have so many lovely.. um artifacts. Did they come down through the family as well?" Celine knew she was treading on dangerous ground but couldn't help wondering if he was the first to have such an obsession with collecting.

"Oh, yes, my things. Well, most of the paintings and rugs and furniture were here, but I have added quite a range of magical artifacts. Some were very hard to find. I have to admit, I'm quite proud of them."

"As you should be. I would love to see some of them." Celine leaned forward, beaming.

“Certainly.” Scraping the crumbs from his plate with his index finger, Lord Remy popped them into his mouth and stood, brushing off his waistcoat. “I’ll show you my favourite room of all. I call it my collection room. In fact, I’ve been thinking there’s one more thing I’d like to add to it and need to make some space on one of the shelves. Come, come.” Lord Remy bustled to the door, leaving Celine and Alex to trail behind him.

Celine reached out a hand to Alex. She knew it wasn’t appropriate, after all they weren’t engaged anymore, but she needed Alex’s touch to keep her mind from going foggy again. He wrapped her small hand in his as they followed Lord Remy down the spiralling staircase.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Alex whispered. “Who knew what kinds of things Lord Remy’s stored in that chamber.”

“I can’t do anything about his treason unless I have proof of crime.” Celine whispered back. “If I can get Lord Remy to confess something—anything in front of us; I’ll have more than a good enough reason to fight him. Otherwise my hands are tied. He’s much too popular—and powerful in court; there’d be chaos if we couldn’t substantiate ourselves.”

“All right, but you’ll have to be very careful. We’re on his territory and he holds all the cards.” Alex squeezed Celine’s hand.

As Celine suspected, Lord Remy led them to the chamber full of mysterious artifacts. She shuddered in disgust as the thick choking oily magic stung coated her skin.

“Ah...” Lord Remy rubbed his hands together in glee as he surveyed his ill-gotten treasures. “All my beautiful things.”

“You discovered all these artifacts yourself?” Celine stayed away from the shelves so she wouldn’t accidentally touch anything.

“Oh yes. I’m afraid my ancestors weren’t open-minded. In fact, until my father passed away, I had to house most of my collection elsewhere. He was very stuffy that way.” An unpleasant darkness lurked in Lord Remy’s eyes when he spoke of his father. “Very unfortunate that father died so young. A curious expression flitted across his face; so brief that if Celine hadn’t been watching him, she would have missed it.”

“What are all these things?” Almost against her will, Celine drifted toward the mysterious bottles of swirling liquid.

“Pfft.” Lord Remy waved a hand dismissively. “It would take too long to explain every little detail. I’ll just show you a few of my favourite items.” He headed toward a heavy wooden table in the centre of the room.

Celine assumed it was some sort of station for mixing things. Rows of bottles and beakers; some containing strange herbs and substances and some empty, filled its length. Lord Remy cleared a space on the table before perusing the bottles, searching for a specific one.

“Here we go.” He picked up a bottle identical in size and shape to the ones that Celine on the mysterious shelf. He blew the dust off the bottle. Swiping it with a cloth before sorting through a basket of corks and stoppers, choosing one that fit tightly into the neck of the bottle.

“You see.” His voice held a note of pride as he looked fondly at Alex and Celine. “My collection is unlike any other in the kingdom. In any of the kingdoms, really. Where other people have pretty things—although nice they’re not terribly useful, my collection is more... shall we say... sentient.” Celine didn’t answer, waiting for his ego to fill the silence.

Lord Remy set the bottle gently on the table and went to the shelf. “Do you see this?” He gestured to the shelf of bottles, glowing gently in the murky light. “These are my life’s work. My most prized possession.” He touched a lavender swirl reverently with the tip of his finger. “It took me years to learn that all human potential can be extracted and preserved. And then even twice as long to figure out how to do it.”

“So—those are?” Celine paused to horrified by the possibility to continue her sentence.

“Yes. Souls, you would call them. But really just a collection of memories, abilities, wants, hungers...” He waved a hand. “All ready for me to use. I’ve searched high and low, and these are the finest in existence; all here for me to access whenever I need a little extra help.”

“Access?” The word slipped out of Celine’s mouth before she could pull it back in. She gazed in dismay at the rows of bottles.

“Oh, yes.” Lord Remy pushed up his spectacles, which were sliding down his nose before reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a small golden vial. “I just put a little in this special warded vial, a tiny pinch, mind you, I wouldn’t want to waste it, not after all the effort I’ve put in. The, I put it around my neck, so it’s touching my skin, and it’s as easy as that. I have all the abilities.”

“But *why*?”

“Why? Indeed, why? You don’t understand what it’s like to be me. Everyone thinking I’m some ignorant backwoods bumpkin just because I’m a little different from them.” His voice rose in indignation. “Obviously *you*

would not understand. You're the precious princess; no one would dare laugh behind your back, ignore you at all the parties, leave you out of their social calendars."

"But you're an important member of the council. Everyone respects you. People love you." Celine protested.

Lord Remy snorted in derision. "I inherited that council position from my father. Yes, people might listen... *now*. But it took years of work before I dared open my mouth at a council meeting. All those bloodthirsty warriors snickered every time I had a suggestion. Fools. They never even noticed when that imposter, the shapeshifter, took your place. I noticed right away. I should have taken *her* powers—very tempting—but I needed her elsewhere. Besides, she'll come back to me, eventually."

Realising the depths of evil and madness Lord Remy had sunk to, Celine couldn't wait to hear more. She threw Alex a meaningful look, hoping he would read her intentions, before putting her hand to the sword hanging from her side.

"I don't think so." Lord Remy smirked as he flicked his index finger. The sword disappeared, reappearing in Lord Remy's hand. "I don't think you'll be needing that where you're going. But first, I need to attend to this friend of yours—an empath, I believe?"

Celine turned to stare at Alex. He gave Celine a sheepish look. "I was going to tell you, there just wasn't a good time."

Lord Remy hummed. "Very interesting. Well, this has been a lovely chat. It's always so nice to catch up with you, my dear. But I really must get to work now." He turned back to the table, picking up the bottle.

Celine sprang forward and knocked the bottle out of his hand. It splintered to the floor with a crash, sending shards of glass scattering in every direction.

"Alex, get the sword!" she shouted as she brought her knee up into Lord Remy's groin. To her surprise, it was like hitting a solid piece of granite sending a streak of white-hot pain shooting through her leg.

Lord Remy smiled as unfazed by her attack he paged through a heavy book; muttering to himself as he flicked through pages covered with scrawled markings.

Celine looked back at Alex, wondering why he wasn't helping her. To her shock and dismay, Alex was frozen, arrested in mid-air, an apologetic expression suspended on his handsome face.

Heart pounding against her ribcage, Celine realized she was on her own. She spun, putting all the power she had into a flying kick aimed at Lord Remy's head. Again, she stopped as if she had hit a wall of stone. Crippled by pain, her mind whirled through her limited options. She had to be quick, Lord Remy was determined, and Celine suspected that determination had something to do with Alex being an empath.

A piece of broken glass crunched under Celine's boot, giving her an idea. Maybe if *she* couldn't touch him, but another object could. Like it had with Karl. She scanned the room, searching for something nearby to test her theory. Edging toward the table, she fixed her eyes on a mortar and pestle made of heavy granite. Perfect. She grabbed the pestle and in one swooping motion flung it at Lord Remy.

Thud. The pestle hit Lord Remy squarely in the forehead. Lord Remy fell to the ground, banging his chin on the table as he tumbled. He sprung up again, spectacles askew, rubbing his head with his hand, a feral spark of anger shooting from his beady eyes.

So another object *could* affect him, but not as much as usual. Celine had thrown from close quarters using considerable force; normally, that would put a man out cold. She had to keep trying.

Blindly, Celine grabbed glass jars and bottles off the table, flinging them at Lord Remy, sending showers of broken glass spraying around the chamber, while doing her best to avoid hitting Alex, who was still frozen in position leaving Celine to fight Lord Remy herself.

Despite the force of her attack, Lord Remy still stood, only a few minor scratches to show for all Celine's efforts. To her dismay, the glass was now merely bouncing off him. There must be some other way of stopping him. Celine cast an eye over the shelves, looking for something... anything that she could use.

There, on a bottom shelf, nearly hidden behind a wooden mask, she spotted a copper sword—the same metal as the collar that had contained Cherry. The only problem was that the sword was on the other side of the table, directly behind Lord Remy. Lifting the largest jar over her head in both hands, she heaved it toward Lord Remy. As it slammed down, she launched herself around the table and toward the shelf. Kicking the mask aside with her booted foot, she grabbed the sword, feeling a strange pleasant tingle skimming across her body as she clutched it tightly. She whirled, poised to strike.

“No!” Lord Remy squealed, chubby face twisted into an expression of fury and terror.

Celine narrowed her eyes and struck, piercing him in the heart.

Lord Remy fell to the ground, the thud reverberating through the chamber. The colored bottles shivered as the blood pooled under his body, mingling with shards of glass. Celine stepped back, nausea bubbling in her stomach. Behind her, she heard breaking glass as one of the tall windows behind her split and shattered, exploding into pieces.

“Hello dear. Is Everything all right?” Mildred poked her grey scaly nose in the window. “I sensed magic and not the good kind. Oh dear, it really reeks in here, doesn’t it?” She wrinkled her nose and sniffed. “Oh my, I see you’ve found the copper sword and used it too. Well done, dear.”

Celine never thought she would be as glad to see anyone as she was to see Mildred at that moment. She let the sword slip from her hand, clattering to the floor.

“Is he—is he dead?” She didn’t dare look at the enormous figure lying prone on the floor.

“I’d say he’s definitely dead. As a doornail—stop shoving; you can look at the humans when I’m finished.” Mildred turned her head and spoke to the scuffling sound beside her.

“Hugo.” She tutted, turning back to Celine. “His nose bothering him as usual. Now, have you finished this business that you came for? I would like to go back and check my egg.”

“I think so.” Celine put a hand to her head, shaky and disoriented. “Except, for him. He still can’t move.” A sudden burst of panic lurched in her chest. Alex wasn’t moving. Celine didn’t understand why the hold the magic had on him didn’t disappear with Lord Remy’s demise.

“Oh, yes, I see what you mean. Well, just use the sceptre to disable it. I know you have it with you.”

“I can’t—I don’t think the sceptre works for me.” Celine admitted, her face downcast.

“Of course, it will.” Mildred’s eyes twinkled, “You are the Lovanian princess, aren’t you? That’s the Lovanian sceptre.”

“Yes. But I don’t have magic.”

“Here, let me show you.” Mildred stretched her neck and poked her nose further inside the room, her fiery breath warming the cold, rank air.

“All you have to do is clear your mind, then picture what it is you want the sceptre to do. The sceptre will do the work for you.”

“All right.” Celine took the sceptre out of her waistband, letting the heavy metal fill her hand. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the ridges and patterns of metal, smooth against rough. She thought about Alex, his loyalty and eagerness to help; even when she was a stranger. A prickling feeling nudged her chest and she guided her thoughts and focused them on Alex; willing him to move. She cracked her eyes open.

“Did anything happen?” She looked hopefully at Mildred.

“Not yet. You’re too tense. Relax. It’s like the sword fighting your so fond of. It takes a little time to get good at it. Just breath in and out slowly before trying this time.” Mildred’s voice was patient.

Celine took a deep breath and closed her eyes again. This time she didn’t grip the sceptre so tightly. She listened to the sound her breath made, in and out, in and out. Again, she concentrated her thoughts on Alex, this time thinking of the way his warm brown eyes twinkled when he smiled at her. The way his hand felt when it wrapped around hers. Now the tingling spark in her chest was stronger. She kept her eyes closed. A rustling sound caught her attention.

Celine opened her eyes and looked again; he was moving. Alex, he blinked and shook his head, staring dumbfounded at the prone figure of Lord Remy lying in a spreading pool of blood.

“What happened?” his eyes slid to Celine, who was more than a bit dishevelled after her ordeal.

“Lord Remy used his magic on you—he was planning to put you in one of those.” Celine gestured to the bottles of swirling liquid on the shelf.

Mildred interrupted them with a shake of her head, reminding Celine of a large dog. “Are we going to go now, it’s rancid in here.”

“I suppose.” Celine looked again at the shelf, reluctance etched on her face. “What should we do with those?” She pointed to the rows of gleaming glass containers. “It would be a shame to leave them here.”

“We’ll take them with us.” Alex decided. “We’ll set up a final resting place where people can come and pay their respects.”

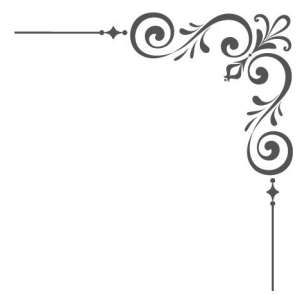
Mildred and Hugo waited in the garden while Celine and Alex gently placed the bottles in two wooden cases lined with blankets. It was with a great sense of relief that Celine finally climbed out of the window and onto Mildred’s back. Flapping her wings, Mildred ascended into the air, circling

the castle. Swooping low, she gave a great roar as fire spewed out of her mouth, setting the castle alight.

“That’s for stealing my egg.” Mildred said with a satisfied air.

“Anyway, that place reeked of dark magic, it needed to be gone. I knew you couldn’t have anything to do with it, my dear, it would have caused far too much trouble. You humans and your politics.” She breathed out another curtain of flames, building up the fire that had already spread to other parts of the building, before diving up into the clear blue sky.

Celine had to admit, she wasn’t sorry to see the end of the place where so many dark deeds had taken place. She took a deep breath, letting the fresh air clear her lungs; giving her a sense of lightness she didn’t know she was missing. She looked over at Alex, who was balancing on Hugo. He gave her a brilliant smile that sent a fission of excitement running through her veins.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dragons were notorious for avoiding human contact—and when Mildred and Hugo landed on the top tower of the castle, pandemonium ensued. It was only the sight of Alex dismounting that kept a flurry of arrows from being shot at the small group.

Setting her wooden case down carefully, Celine thanked Mildred, even daring to give her a hug, a short one—the scales were hot and prickly. “We never would have survived without you.” Emotion filled Celine’s voice as she looked into the golden eyes.

“Of course my dear, as far as humans go, you’re not too bad. And that prince of yours is quite nice too. I suggest you keep him.” Mildred winked at Celine. “I have a feeling I’ll see you again sometime. Maybe I’ll even come back for a visit.”

“Would you?” Celine bounced on her toes, thinking about the fun they would have when a giant dragon landed at the castle. “You’re welcome to come anytime.” She gave Mildred another squeeze before the giant beast leapt into the air, circling once then disappearing behind a cloud.

“You’re back!” Lucie and Frederich appeared, out of breath from climbing the steps to tower. The next few hours flew by with a flurry of activity. Celine briefed the King and Queen along with Frederich, Lucie and the Iasian council on the actions of the errant Lord and their part in defeating him. They decided the three Lovanian royals would leave immediately for Lovan to report to King Erich and Queen Isabella. At long last, Celine returned to her chamber, delighted to find Sarah and Louise waiting for her.

“Where did they find you?” she turned to Louise.

“Cherry tied me up and hid me in her dressing room. She caught me searching for the sceptre. I heard Lucie and Frederich come in and get the sceptre. Frederich broke the trunk open with the vanity chair.”

“So the sceptre was in the trunk?” Tears came into Celine’s eyes at the bravery of her friend. “Thank you for helping. I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

“Now, It’s time for you to get cleaned up... I hate to say it, but you smell just like dragon.” Louise gave Celine a little shove toward the large bath

that steaming in the corner of the room. The fresh smell of floral soap wafted toward Celine.

“And then,” Louise continued, with a hint of cheekiness in her smile. “We’re going to make you look more beautiful than you ever have before. After all, you’re leaving in the morning and we’re going to make sure that a certain prince that will remain nameless won’t be able to forget about you.”

Louise and Sarah exchanged a meaningful glance.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” muttered Celine, as she lowered herself into the bath. “Alex had plenty of chances to tell me how he feels, but he has said nothing yet.”

“He just wanted to wait for the right time.” Sarah reassured her as she added another dollop of scented oil to the water and gave it a stir. “Now, let me wash your hair. Louise will have your dress ready when you finish.”

When Celine emerged, wrinkled but refreshed from her bath, she wrapped herself in a fluffy towel. The girls fussed around her, taming the mass of golden hair into smooth ripples that fell down her back. Celine stepped into a gauzy gown, one of Lucie’s signature pieces known for being both beautiful and comfortable. The soft folds skimmed across her silky skin.

“And Lucie sent this for you to wear.” Sarah drew a sparkling crown out of a velvet pouch. She pinned it on. Celine tilted her head. The gold metal blended in perfectly with the shining waves of her hair.

“There. *Now* you’re ready.” The two girls took a step back, admiring their handiwork.

“It’s time for you to go.” Sarah pushed Celine toward the door.

The steward led Celine to a place near the head of the table next to her brother and sister-in-law. Queen Abigail had taken it upon herself to send them off in style and had spared no expense. Everything was even grander than usual, the glow of the multitude of candles placed around the room gleamed against the crystal and fine china.

Friendly faces filled the room, many she recognized from her previous visit to Iasia. Now that she had resolved the issue with Cherry, the room seemed lighter, happier. Celine looked up just as Alex entered the room. The last time she had seen him he was dishevelled and windblown. But now—now he was perfection itself. His jacket and breeches fit perfectly and showed off his dark hair and chiselled features. Their eyes met and for a moment Celine couldn’t breathe. She looked away and fidgeted with her

fork, hoping the dim lighting would hide the fiery blush on her cheeks. Alex took his place next to her, and a warm tingle enveloped every nerve in her body at his nearness.

“Our last night,” he said in a low voice, his smile not quite reaching his eyes.

Celine gave him a faltering smile, wishing she had more time.

King Ruben stood, tapping his spoon against his glass. “This dinner is in honour of our royal guests, especially princess Celine, who has so bravely endured the trials and has come out victorious. And of course, the crown Prince Frederich of Lovan and his lovely wife, the princess Lucie.”

The crowd toasted the three royals as Celine pasted on a polite smile.

After dinner the musicians arrived, and the dancing began.

“May I?” Prince Alex held out his hand to Celine.

Celine put her hand in his large warm one and glided to the dance floor. It was an Iasian dance, one that Celine was unfamiliar with, but she soon learned the steps and was laughing as he swung her around the floor. Nearby she saw Lucie and Frederich also enjoying the moment.

“You’re sad,” Alex said, searching Celine’s face. The music had slowed to a more sedate pace, but Alex showed no sign of wanting to change partners.

“A little,” Celine admitted, remembering with an uncomfortable start that Alex was an empath and could sense her feelings.

“Don’t worry.” Alex chuckled. “I can’t read your thoughts, just your feelings. And most of the time I try to shut out other people’s feelings; it’s too invasive.”

“Is that why you avoid court so much?” Celine asked.

“I suppose. You know, no one’s ever asked me that before. I can tune people out most of the time, but it takes a lot of effort. It can get tiring.”

Celine breathed a sigh of relief. Some feelings she had around Alex were not something she wanted to share with anyone.... let alone him.

“And, do you tune *me* out?” Celine knew she shouldn’t ask but could resist the impulse.

“Almost always unless I get distracted.”

“Oh.” Embarrassment flooded Celine as she wondered what exact feelings had slipped through the walls of his defense.

“I think that’s why I avoided you at first.” Alex held Celine close as they swayed to the music. “I knew you didn’t like what my mother was

doing. I didn't want to force you into anything."

"Well, I didn't know you then." Celine raised her lashes, but his face was impassive, revealing nothing.

Before she could say anything else, the music ended. Alex bowed politely and stepped back as his brother, Prince Landry cut in.

"You've made quite an impression on my brother." Prince Landry—similar to his brother in looks—couldn't be more different in personality. Cheerful and carefree, his smiles were generous and frequent, and he was the last to leave at any social gathering.

"How do you know?" Celine asked.

"Alex is my brother, of course I know. He's been completely different since you showed up; not avoiding court for one thing."

"Really? Did he avoid it that much? What was he going to do when he had to become king?"

"Oh, he planned to join in... eventually. But he worried about all so many people depending on him. It weighs on him to have the future of a kingdom resting on his shoulders, especially when he wasn't brought up expecting it to be prince then king."

"I know how that feels." Celine remembered when Prince Frederick disappeared, and she had to face a future as the queen of Lovan.

"He's gained his confidence since he met you. He saw how you stepped up and took things on and he realized he can do it too."

Celine's heart warmed to think that she had influenced Alex in some small way.

"Alex would never admit it out loud, but he's devastated that you're leaving so soon." Landry spun Celine under his arm before swinging her back out again.

Celine worried at her lip as she considered this additional information. She knew if she returned to Lovan without being engaged, her father and mother would waste no time in seeking new alternatives. In fact, Celine suspected that one reason they had held off the search for a marriage partner for her son long was because they hoped the alliance with Iasia would work out.

"Doesn't he know how I feel about him? After all, he has the empath gift."

"Alex would never use that to invade anyone's privacy, especially not yours. If you want him to know how you feel, you'll have to tell him—with

words.” The prince smirked at the look of dismay that crossed Celine’s face.

“You could go now. He’s right over there.” Landry pointed out a spot near the refreshment table. As if sensing their attention, Alex glanced up, schooling his expression into his usual poker face.

The music ground to a halt and Celine curtsied to Landry, gathering all her courage to go to Alex. After all, she would leave first thing in the morning. What was there to lose?

Weaving through the merrymakers, Celine headed straight to the refreshment table to find him. When she finally arrived, after being held back by not one, but three lords, Alex was gone.

Celine scanned the room, forcing herself to remain calm. He had probably gotten caught up in conversation, much as she had. She strolled around the edge other side of the room, trying to look purposeful enough that no one else would try to stop her.

But he had completely disappeared, lost to the crowd. Celine accepted the hand of the Earl claiming the next dance, hoping to glimpse Alex from the dance floor; but she saw no sign of the elusive prince. His usual spot near the king and queen remained empty, and Celine’s heart sank as she realized Alex must have retreated early.

Blinking away the tears that threatened to fall, she forced herself to smile the rest of the night. She would surely have another chance to speak to him before tomorrow morning.

The next morning arrived far too soon. After breakfast, Celine dressed in her travelling clothes and wound her way to the audience hall where King Ruben and Queen Abigail would issue a formal goodbye to the departing royals.

Well-wishers and curious onlookers packed the hall that morning. Celine surreptitiously glanced around, hoping to spot Alex, but he wasn’t there either.

“Hello my dear.” It was Queen Abigail, resplendent in a brocade gown, jewels glittering at her throat and wrists. Alex told me to send you his apologies, he’s been under the weather since last night.

“I hope it isn’t serious?” Celine’s heart squeezed into her throat as she realized she had missed her chance to speak to Alex.

“I don’t believe so. Alex should make a full recovery soon.” Queen Abigail’s eyes flickered as she smoothed her hair, layered diamond rings

winking in the morning sun. “But Landry will be down shortly.” She smiled brightly.

After long speeches by King Ruben and several of the council members, they ushered the young royals to the courtyard where crowds of people were waving; all there to see them off. Celine smiled and waved dutifully, covering the ache in her heart with a beaming smile.

The three royals mounted their horses, opting to ride the first leg of the journey. Their carriages followed behind. Sarah already seated in one of carriages; with Tommy sitting tall next to her. He had received the official post of grooming and caring for Celine’s horse when she wasn’t riding and proudly wore the little uniform Sarah procured for him.

Finally, after much fanfare, the party was off. Celine’s heart heavy as she glanced around the castle courtyard one final time. A lump in her throat as they wound their way through streets of cheering people waving banners and flags. Alex never even *tried* to see her off. She waved mechanically to the people thronging the streets. I must not have meant that much to him, Celine thought, pausing to accept an armful of flowers from a gap toothed little girl.

The crowds thinned, and streets crowded with shops and businesses gave way to the rocky terrain that had become so familiar to Celine over the past few weeks.

“Are you all right?” Frederich left Lucie’s side to ride next to Celine.

“Never better.” Celine pasted a wide smile on her aching cheeks. “It’s such a beautiful day and I can’t wait to get home to Mother and Father.”

“Well, you got what you came for. The engagement is off, and with no repercussions from the Iasians. I have to say, you’ve done well.”

Celine’s smile slipped, before she quickly corrected it. “Oh, yes. Well, I think you underestimated me.”

Frederich examined Celine carefully as she put all her effort into looking carefree. Happy.

“Are you sure that’s what you wanted? It’s all right to change your mind, you know.” Frederich’s voice was gentle.

“I’m delighted that things turned out how they did.” Celine’s cheeks hurt from smiling.

“Oh well, in that case, we might have a problem. Because someone’s riding up behind us; and they appear very determined.” Frederich shot Celine a grin before resuming his place beside Lucie.

Celine turned in her saddle, craning her neck to see what Frederick meant. Approaching them in a cloud of dust was Alex.

“Alex? What are you doing here?” Celine’s blue eyes widened.

“I came to see you.” Frederick rode up beside Celine, letting his horse catch his breath.

“Oh.”

“I couldn’t let you leave Iasia before telling you how I felt.” Ignoring the surrounding people, Frederick gazed at Celine as if she were the only person who existed.

“How you feel about what?” Celine asked in a quiet voice.

“You. How I feel about you. When my mother told me we were to be engaged, I was angry. How dare she take that choice away from me after all my other choices were taken away as well? I wanted so badly to dislike you. But the moment I saw you, I couldn’t. It was in the hallway, when you bumped into that serving girl.”

“Louise.” Celine breathed.

“Yes. And instead of rushing by; like most girls would, you stopped to help. Even when it made you late.”

“And the longer I knew you; the more I respected and admired you. Eventually that respect turned into more.”

“More?” Celine’s eyes caught his and held.

“So much more.” Alex’s voice was a whisper. “I think that you’re the sweetest, strongest, most beautiful girl in the world.” He reached out and took her hand in his. His thumb rubbed gently on her wrist as he held it and gradually drew her near. By now, the others had ridden ahead, giving the two some much needed privacy.

“I feel the same way.” Celine dropped her eyes; heart beating like a drum.

Alex drew her closer and leaned over, pressing his lips gently against hers.

Celine’s heart soared. She had, in the past, secretly allowed one or two of the nobles in Lovan to kiss her; even had a childish fling with an Earl at one point and let him call her his sweetheart for a few weeks—until her father put a stop to it; telling her it wasn’t right for someone in her position to play favourites. But it didn’t felt like this. Never. His warm lips moved gently over hers as his other hand moved to cup her cheek. The horses shifted, bringing Celine back to reality with a thud. She glanced at the party

ahead; where everyone was keeping their eyes studiously to the front; except Tommy who bounced on his knees in the back of the carriage grinning wildly.

Celine grinned back as Alex raised their hands, still clasped together.

“Well, I see you’ve finally made your move.” Frederich appeared beside them. He gave Alex a friendly slap on the back. “What are you waiting for? Let’s get a move on.” He turned his horse around, kicking up a small cloud of dust.

“Wait, you’re coming *with* us?” Celine’s eyes flew to the bulging saddlebag strapped to Alex’s horse.

“Of course.” A wide smile crossed Alex's face. “I couldn’t let you escape again, now, could I? Who knows what you’d be up to next, sea monsters probably.”

Celine gave an unladylike snort as she urged her horse back into formation, Alex riding beside her. “Everyone knows sea monsters don’t exist.”

A few days later, King Erich and Queen Abigail received Celine with open arms. An engagement celebration followed, which Alex suffered through. He was becoming accustomed to larger groups of people; he told Celine in private as they walked in the castle gardens one evening.

The council members met the news of Lord Remy’s betrayal with sadness; most of them had no idea of his more morbid tendencies; although a few of them, Lord Gunther in particular, claimed they had been suspicious all along. Lucie was especially disappointed; after all, it was Lord Remy who had stood by her and encouraged her to accept her own powers and taught her to use the sceptre.

Saddened as she was by this; Celine found it impossible to remain disheartened long. Life with Alex was exciting, and she threw herself into planning the imminent move to Iasia.

The wedding was a beautiful day, filled with flowers and all the people Celine loved the most in the world. The next morning when she woke up, Celine’s cheeks still hurt from smiling. But it was her new life she was most looking forward to. Alex and Celine spent a week in the hunting lodge away for their honeymoon. They had such fun that the lake lodge became their special place, a haven from busy court life.

They arrived back from one of such visits one sunny Tuesday morning. The courtyard was a hive of activity.

“What’s going on?” Alex dismounted, stepping around a supply wagon.

“There you are.” King Ruben popped his head out of the wagon, beaming. “We’re going on a tour of the kingdom. It’s about time Celine saw the rest of the country.”

Find out what happens on Celine’s tour of Iasia in Book 3. True – a Retelling of Puss in Boots.

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